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Practices of Small Learning Communities in Selected Minnesota School Districts

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PRACTICES OF SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN SELECTED MINNESOTA SCHOOL DISTRICTS

by

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This dissertation, submitted by Mary Joanne Schmid in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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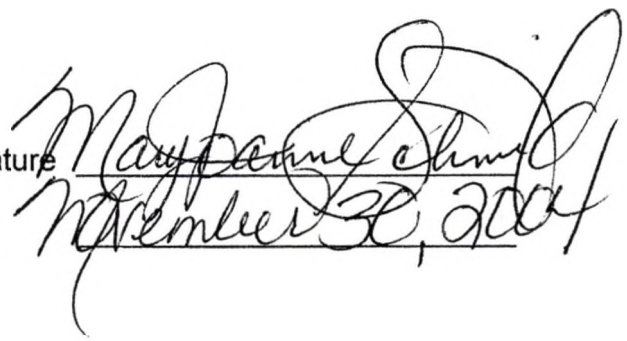
Signature 

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to provide educators with information on the characteristics and practices of small learning communities in elementary schools. A small learning community is a small unit of learners and educators who are members of a larger group of learners. The small learning community operates as a separate entity from the larger whole. For the purpose of this study, a small learning community is defined as an individualized learning unit within a larger school setting housing 400 or fewer students.

The qualitative study examined data collected by the researcher in fall 2003. During an internship with the Moorhead Area Public Schools, information was collected from three small learning communities in large, student-populated elementary schools in three Minnesota school districts. The data, collected through interviews with teachers and principals, described planning, practices, and problems within each school.

Primary data collected from the three schools were examined for emerging categories, patterns, and themes describing small learning communities. Three common themes emerged: teacher involvement and commitment, the principal as an instructional design leader, and the instructional design creates a learning community.

Based on this study, the following conclusions are offered:

Small learning communities in large, student-populated elementary schools create small learning environments where students experience a sense of belonging and personalized education.

There are six common characteristics that are prevalent in effective, successful small learning communities. These include autonomy, leadership and decision making, identity, personalization, instructional focus, and accountability. Small learning communities establish characteristics through a variety of educational practices that create a school culture focused on student achievement.

A collaborative culture emerges in small learning communities. Decisions regarding curriculum, scheduling, practices, and professional development are based on the needs of students and are made by the school's teachers and principal.

Small learning communities face difficulties and problems through the course of their development.

Recommendations were made for educators preparing to move into small learning communities. Teachers and principals may be able to use the findings to determine and replicate practices that facilitate the successful development of a small learning community in an elementary school.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Schools need to be nurturing, safe institutions where children are immersed in positive learning environments that promote social values, encourage individual growth, and recognize each learner as a unique member of the school community (Nathan & Febey, 2001; Wasley & Lear, 2001). One aspect of the educational environment examined through research is the impact of school size on the development of a positive school community (Cotton, 2001). Findings indicate that small schools offer students increased opportunities to experience a positive school community and to become active members of the school community (Anderson, 1998; Cotton, 2001; Meier, 1996; Raywid, 1996). In recognition of these findings, educators have attempted to develop small learning communities as a means of creating a positive educational environment in large school buildings (Cotton, 2001; Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Wasley et al., 2000).

A small learning community is a small unit of learners and educators who are members of a larger group of learners and educators who operate as a separate entity from the larger whole. The small learning community embraces the characteristics of a small school and at the same time enjoys the benefits of the larger school (Cotton, 2001; Cushman, 1999). The small learning community

is often built upon a particular educational approach (Cotton, 2001; Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Wasley et al., 2000). The student population may be selected from across a number of grade levels or may include just one specific grade level (Wasley et al., 2000). The small learning community may be autonomous to the point of stakeholders managing its own governance and budget or it may operate solely as a separate program and function within the larger community (Meier, 2002; Raywid, 1996). Stakeholders within the small learning community include educators, parents, and students.

Statement of the Problem

Small schools can be more costly to operate, a factor that cannot be ignored in an era of economic reform (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001). School boards and administrators are seeking ways to save costs, and schools with small enrollments are becoming schools with large enrollments. Thus, educators developing educational environments that foster social, emotional, and academic growth need to examine the characteristics of small schools that contribute to student success. They need to further determine the feasibility of transferring these small school characteristics into a large school through the development of small learning communities. To do so, educators need to identify educational practices that ensure the establishment of the small school characteristics in the small learning community. This study examines the establishment of small learning communities in larger elementary schools and identifies organizational practices that can be replicated by educators in other elementary schools.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study is to provide educators with information on the characteristics and practices of small learning communities in elementary schools. The findings of this study may enable them to establish these characteristics through the replication of practices implemented in small learning communities in other schools.

Preliminary Review of the Literature

A review of the literature supports the fact that small schools are superior to large schools in providing an educationally effective environment (Anderson, 1998; Cotton, 2001; Meier, 1996; Raywid, 1996). Small schools have student populations of 400 or fewer (Anderson, 1998; Mitchell, 2000). Small schools have been shown to increase student achievement (Howley, Strange, & Bickel, 2000; Wasley & Lear, 2001); foster strong, ongoing student-adult relationships (Meier, 2002; Wasley & Lear, 2001); and improve student behavior (Robertson, 2001; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992). In small schools, teachers know students personally and support smaller numbers of students, resulting in more individual attention for students (Boss, 2000; Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Meier, 2002). Small schools have a safe, positive, challenging environment with fewer discipline problems (Ayers, Bracey, & Smith, 2000; Nathan & Febey, 2001). Further characteristics include a simpler, effective governance system within the school (Meier, 1996); high level of parent involvement (Anderson, 1998; Cotton, 1996; Nathan & Febey, 2001); and high levels of student involvement in extracurricular activities (Cotton, 1996).

With so many positive benefits, it would seem the disadvantages of a small school would be limited. Still, there are concerns to be considered. Small schools can be more costly to operate, a factor that cannot be ignored in an era of economic reform (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001). Large schools with more personnel are able to offer a diversified curriculum to students (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Mitchell, 2000). Large schools allow for a variety of ways for meeting student needs that small schools are less likely to provide. Within small schools, the limited number of staff members can lead to staff relationship problems (Meier, 2002; Raywid, 1996). Staff relationship problems may result from an inability of the group to work together or to remain focused on student needs resulting in tension. Within a larger setting, staff relationship problems can be minimized by offering a number of individuals opportunities to work together. Finally, within a small school, educators tend to group students consistently by their ability; whereas, there are limited grouping possibilities due to the small number of students (Raywid, 1996).

The number of disadvantages appear to be minimal while the advantages of small schools are strong and encouraging. Yet, with dwindling economic resources, school districts are consolidating and moving away from small schools. Within some communities, economics force the closure of older, deteriorating, small neighborhood schools. Communities have large school buildings that continue to be usable. These buildings are not discarded as a result of research, indicating that their size alone may minimize their

effectiveness. School district officials continue to support building and maintaining large, efficient school buildings (Nathan & Febey, 2001).

In many school districts, developing small learning communities within a larger school building has become a means of reaping the small school benefits while working with the available facilities. This approach takes on many forms but ultimately attempts to create a learning environment that is healthy and effective for students (Allen, 2003; Cotton, 1996).

The students in a small learning community experience a number of the same benefits found in small schools including safety, a positive climate, fewer discipline problems, a sense of belonging, personalizing of education, and greater overall satisfaction with the school experience (Cotton, 2001; McAndrews & Anderson, 2002; Moles, 2003). Learners are also able to tap into broader learning opportunities and high-quality services that can result in higher achievement rates and a better chance of graduation (McAndrews & Anderson, 2002).

Overall, the small learning community is a way to reduce the disadvantages of a larger school. It is a method of school organization that can ensure a personalized approach to learning that is more easily developed in smaller settings.

A substantial amount of literature over the past 15 years has been generated on the impact of school size on a school's culture and climate (Cotton, 2001). Along with it comes a body of research used by educators attempting to utilize the benefits of small schools within larger facilities. A result

is the development of a positive school community that lends itself to effective educational practices.

The culture of a school is the foundation on which educators design, build, and implement educational programs. Schools need to establish a culture that promotes an effective learning environment that is receptive to change and reform. It is the culture of the school that ultimately leads to greater student achievement (Capps & Maxwell, 1999; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Haycock, 2001). Educators recognize that understanding the culture of a school is essential to successful reform efforts (Berger, 1997; Deal & Peterson, 1999).

Research identifies the importance of community in schools. Community provides identity for social groupings of individuals whose members share personal, economic, and political interests. The school forms a community by drawing together religious, racial, political, and ethnic groups. Schools, therefore, blend a variety of communities within a single, larger community. In doing so, the school community must respect and celebrate the multi-culturalism that develops within the school (Comeau, 1999).

Boyer (1995) explains that school communities must be purposeful with a clear and vital vision. He further states that "a school community must be communicative, just, disciplined, caring and celebrative" (p. 18). School communities can take on many different forms. Communities may be caring, learning, professional, collegial, inclusive, or inquiring. But, before any of these can be realized, the school must be a purposeful community bound together by shared ideologies (Sergiovanni, 1994).

Community exists in classrooms as well as in the school. The classroom community consists of a teacher and individual students. Each classroom develops as a community built around common goals and interests. Students who are members of the classroom integrate into the community through shared identity with other group members and a social process that relies on collaborative activities (Bull, 1999). The community that develops within the classroom provides a model for community within the larger school (Berger, 1997).

Extensive research reports the positive effect class size and school size has on school culture and community. Research indicates that smaller classes, especially in the first three years of schooling, benefit students through the personalization of learning (Holloway, 2002). Small school sizes are credited with positive student attitudes and gains. In small schools, educators experience increased job satisfaction (Viadero, 2001). Overall, there is a correlation between class and school size and a purposeful school culture and community. Wagner (2001) explains this correlation as a "relational accountability system" (p. 1). Within this system, students and educators work together collaboratively, learn to know and trust each other, and feel less anonymous. A purposeful school culture and collaborative school community evolves through which educators may meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students.

The challenge for school district officials lies in finding innovative ways to downsize large school buildings and reorganize school environments into small learning communities. Raywid (2002) explains that downsizing needs to be more

than reducing school size. It must provide "safer, more humane, and more effective schools that can reach the expanded variety of students successfully" (p. 47).

Research Questions

Key research questions emerged from the literature review that focused the study on the characteristics of small learning communities. These questions were used to identify practices that established the small learning community characteristics and develop the study's design and analysis.

1. Why were small learning communities organized?
2. How were small learning communities organized?
3. How did the small learning communities operate?
4. How were teachers involved in the development and implementation of a small learning community?
5. How does the school principal support the small learning community?
6. How did small learning communities affect the culture of a school?

Significance of the Study

School improvement efforts are demanding and complex. Educators must utilize improvement strategies that are sustainable and become imbedded in the culture of the school. The development of small learning communities is an educational strategy that meets these criteria.

Hargreaves and Fink (2000) explain that long-lasting educational improvement can only be ensured when three dimensions of reform interact

simultaneously. These dimensions–depth, sustainability, and breadth–go beyond short-term strategies.

Educational improvements must have depth, improving important aspects of student learning. Student learning must be results orientated and demonstrated through measurable achievement. Reform must go beyond pedagogy and reach into the social and emotional realm of student learning. Reform means making sure that academics are blended with cultural connections and emotional bonds. Instruction must be responsive to learners' varied cultures and inclusive of their ideas and background.

Educational improvements must be sustainable. Changes need to be more than strategies. Problems need to be identified and stakeholders must be prepared to overcome each obstacle.

Educational improvements must have breadth that extends beyond one classroom, one school, or even one district. Reform must be able to exist within the variations of cultural and social characteristics of students, quality of leadership, and the level of teacher involvement (Hargreaves & Fink, 2000).

This study examines small learning communities as an approach toward educational change that has depth, sustainability, and breadth. It provides educators a perspective on current literature and strategies for implementing organizational change through the formation of small learning communities in elementary schools.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined for the convenience of the reader:

Clustering: grouping classrooms together into a unit to form a small learning community (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 1997*).

Cross grade: an organizational approach to student grouping where students from one or more grade levels are grouped together ("Research Online," 1998).

Educators: professionally certified and non-certified individuals involved with the education of students (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 1997*).

Elementary school: a school that provides instruction for students in kindergarten through fifth grade (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 1997*).

Looping: students who remain with a teacher for more than one year ("Research Online," 1998).

Multiage: students in two or three grade levels mixed in one classroom based on the philosophy that this approach to grouping improves student learning and attitudes toward school ("Research Online," 1998).

School district officials: school district administrators and school board members who are empowered to make decisions for the entire district (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 1997*).

School culture:

> [A] complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization. The culture is the historically transmitted pattern

> of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act. (Barth, 2002, p. 8)

Small learning community: a small unit of students and educators who are members of a larger group of students and educators who operate as a separate entity from the larger whole. The small learning community embraces the attributes of a small school and at the same time enjoys the benefits of the larger school (Cotton, 1996).

Small school: school with a student population of 400 or fewer students (Cotton, 1996; Meier, 1996; Wasley, 2001).

Large school: school with a student population of more than 400 students (Cotton, 1996).

Assumptions

The assumptions of this study are as follows:

1. There were common practices employed by educators in small learning communities in Minnesota elementary schools.
2. There were common challenges educators in small learning communities in Minnesota elementary schools faced when developing small learning communities.
3. Practices employed in small learning communities in Minnesota elementary schools can be replicated in other elementary schools.
4. Educators interviewed in this study were guided by a framework of instructional standards issued by the Minnesota Department of

Education. Although the instructional approaches and materials varied in each school, the curriculum goals essentially remained the same.

5. This multiple case study reflects the personalities and biases of the educators interviewed. It is assumed that all educators interviewed were capable, competent, and comparable in ability and skill. It is also assumed that the school climate in each school was safe, comfortable, and offered equitable opportunities for students' academic success.

Researcher Bias

The personal experiences of the researcher as an educator attempting to develop small learning communities in a new elementary school may suggest to the reader that there is a lack of objectivity in the research. To reduce researcher bias, the researcher created a professional portfolio during the research experience in order to record thoughts and observations that were specific to the researcher's school. It was the goal of the researcher to develop a better understanding of the development of small learning communities through the perspectives of educators practicing in established small learning communities. Ultimately, the researcher will develop small learning communities in a large elementary school by replicating the practices researched through this study.

Delimitations

The research in the study was delimited to three elementary schools representing three different school districts located in a metropolitan area of Minnesota. Random sampling was not possible because of the unavailability of

elementary schools implementing small learning communities found in a previous search for these schools.

The study is limited pre-existing data collected through interviews with elementary school principals and teachers employed at the selected schools. Since the purpose of the study was to provide relevant information on the characteristics and practices of small learning communities to elementary educators in the Moorhead (Minnesota) area public schools, a qualitative study was designed. The resulting multiple case study provided the most appropriate means for reporting the study's findings to this specific group of educators.

Overview

The remaining chapters of this dissertation include a literature review, the methodology of the study, the findings, and a final summary.

Chapter II: a review of current literature that defines school community, the impact of school size, and the resulting school culture. It also reviews literature on the various types of small learning communities and effective practices of small learning communities within schools.

Chapter III: methodology used to investigate small learning communities within three Minnesota elementary schools, criteria for selection of the three elementary schools, and questions posed by the researcher.

Chapter IV: the findings.

Chapter V: summarizes the study and offers recommendations for the planning, designing, and implementing of small learning communities within elementary schools.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Research contributes substantial evidence that a sense of community within a school contributes to student success. Research also indicates that school size is a component of a positive school community. Identifying factors that contribute to the development of a positive school community are essential as educators develop strategies that maximize student achievement. Examining research on school culture and community assists educators trying to understand the connection to student social, emotional, and academic growth.

This chapter reviews research on the relationships between school culture, community, and size and the subsequent design and configuration of small learning communities.

School Culture

Culture exists in every aspect of human society. It shapes human behavior and teaches the values and beliefs that are essential to society. Barth (2002) states that school culture is a "complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions and myths" (p. 8). It is historically transmitted and has astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act. Culture serves as a template for predictable and common

actions in every aspect of day-to-day life. It is passed on from generation to generation, becoming increasingly more organized and complex as the society it encompasses grows larger. As smaller systems emerge, culture provides a framework for further organization of families and communities that develop their own culture. Culture plays a pervasive role within all components of society (Miraglia, Law, & Collins, 1996).

Education advances the beliefs and values that provide the foundation for society. Every school develops a culture of its own which is the personification of the larger culture but also reflects the behaviors, beliefs, and values of the immediate community as well as the individuals within its walls. It is an invisible, taken for granted flow of beliefs and assumptions (Peterson & Deal, 1998).

Sergiovanni (2000) explains school culture as the "normative glue" that holds a school together. He further explains that "culture serves as a compass setting, steering people in a common direction" (p. 1).

Culture is the underlying current of overt and covert activity that drives every action within a school and influences behaviors on how things are to be done. Deal and Peterson (1999) explain culture as "the stream of thought and activity that flows beneath the conscious awareness of everyday life. This underground flow of feelings and folkways wends its way within schools, dragging people, programs, and ideas toward often-unstated purposes" (p. 3).

School culture has far more influence on life and learning in a school than the state department of education, school board, superintendent, and even the school's principal (Barth, 2001). Deal and Peterson (1999) list a number of

examples where culture impacts a school. These examples include fostering school effectiveness and productivity, improving collegial and collaborative activities, and improving communication. Culture fosters successful change efforts, builds commitment by the school's stakeholders, and increases the focus of daily behavior. Finally, culture amplifies the motivation and energy of the school's staff, students, and community (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

School culture can either be healthy and productive or it can become toxic and counterproductive. Schools with a toxic culture are resistant to change (Barth, 2002). They become static and lack self-efficacy. In these schools, educators do not accept responsibility for student learning (Barth, 2002). They become protective of their personal territory and choose to work by themselves. The school is focused on activities, not learning results (DuFour & Burnette, 2002). When the culture of a school is healthy, it is fluid and continually adjusting and ongoing. Mission and purpose are at the heart of a school with healthy culture (Peterson & Deal, 1998). In these schools, educators take responsibility for student learning and become a catalyst for change. A strong school can develop its own innovations and design interventions that are often more successful than externally forced reform models (Bruner & Greenlee, 2001).

An effective learning environment is supported by a healthy culture where academic success and motivation to learn are expected, respected, and rewarded (Renchler, 1992; Stolp, 1994). The underlying values, norms, and traditions contribute to achievement gains (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Stolp, 1994).

The school's culture influences pedagogy, the types of communications that occur, and acceptance of change. Culture, therefore, impacts student learning within a school. School effectiveness, productivity, and performance are influenced by the underlying norms, values, and traditions. In schools with a caring culture, teacher commitment grows stronger, increasing the daily focus on what is important and valued. Overall, the culture amplifies motivation, energy, and vitality (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Stolp, 1994).

A growing body of research indicates that a school's culture is a critical component in the success or failure of educational reforms (Barth, 2002; Berger, 1997; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 2001). If reforms are to be made, a healthy culture must support and encourage the changes contributing to reform or improvements will not be made (Berger, 1997; Deal & Peterson, 1999). Hughes and Andreas (1995) state that within a strong culture educators are going to be able to withstand the "questions, struggles, and hurdles that come with the implementation of anything new" (p. 30).

Barth (2002) adds another important factor regarding school culture, stating that "all school cultures are incredibly resistant to change, which makes school improvement–from within or from without–usually futile" (p. 7). He goes on to explain that unless a school's culture changes, attempts to use innovative and research approaches will not be successful. It takes strong leadership and commitment on the part of educators to make cultural changes that support reform efforts and ultimately lead to improved student success.

Building and changing a school's culture is challenging. Creating a school's culture requires deliberate changes that take time, examining the existing traditions and developing trust. Educators attempting to make change need to understand existing culture and pay attention to routines (Stolp, 1994). Cultural changes alter a wide variety of relationships that are at the core of institutional stability (Stolp, 1994). A change in focus can only occur through understanding dialogue, hesitation, concern for others, and a modeling of values and beliefs (Allen, 2003; Stolp, 1994). Modifications in culture must be developed around teacher leadership and teamwork and be rooted in a shared vision (Allen, 2003; Deal & Peterson, 1999; DuFour & Burnette, 2002; Stolp, 1994). The principal is the prime shaper of cultural change and must be willing to encourage dialogue, listen, and model a willingness to share power (Allen, 2003).

Principals hoping to establish educational reforms need to be acutely aware of the culture within the school and recognize the impact of the current culture before attempting to make changes. Cultural awareness involves observing the daily activities of the school, learning who has power and influence among the staff, and participating in the activities of the school community. At the same time, a principal is required to step back and look into the culture without becoming so completely immersed that he or she is unable to see the patterns of leadership, competition, fearfulness, self-interest, or healthy and unhealthy elements. Therefore, making cultural change must be a deliberate process based on understanding what currently is and what needs to change.

Principals need to be cautious so as not to disrupt the purpose of the school, yet forthright in bringing around changes that support reform efforts. Changing culture is difficult, but important in a standards-based era that demands greater student and staff accountability (Barth, 2002).

School Community

One of the dimensions of culture is community (Comeau, 1999; Sergiovanni, 1994). Community provides identity for social groupings of individuals whose members share common personal, economic, and political interests. Community is a social formation that can be found in formal organizations within society, including schools. The formation of community requires a shift from a personal orientation to an orientation that focuses on the collective whole. A school community develops when all stakeholders come together to enable educators and students to develop a common conception of why it is good to come together, to engage in discussion, and thus create a school (Comeau, 1999).

Understanding the human need for affiliation provides a foundation for understanding the development of community within a school. A review of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a comprehensive explanation. Maslow states that humans have a hierarchy of needs starting with basic survival. A hierarchical pattern develops as each level of need is met through continual growth and development. Once the need for survival is met, individuals move to the next level–security and safety. As the need for safety is met, individuals move up again to the next level–social affiliation. This pattern

continues through esteem, and ultimately, self actualization. Maslow defines the lower four needs of basic survival, safety, affiliation, and esteem as deficiency needs because people are motivated to meet them and it is difficult to move up to a higher order need until they are met (Maslow & Sorokin, 1959; Owens, 1998).

Educators recognizing the power of basic human needs, and addressing these needs daily, can provide an environment that supports the focus on students reaching their academic potential (Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1996). Every school must be a place that supports the development of students' social, emotional, and academic growth. It is through community that educators can provide social and emotional support (O'Neil & Comer, 1997).

Sergiovanni (1994) would challenge educators to determine whether schools are authentic communities or counterfeit communities. An authentic school community is where educators are required to think, believe, and practice community that becomes imbedded into the school's policy structure. Sergiovanni further states,

> Community is the tie that binds students and teachers together in special ways, to something more significant than themselves: shared values and ideas. It lifts both teachers and students to higher levels of self-understanding, commitment and performance–beyond the reaches of shortcomings and difficulties they face in their everyday lives. Community can help teachers and students be transformed from a collection of "I's" to a collective "we," thus providing them with a unique and enduring sense of identity, belonging, and place. (p. xiii)

Researchers identify a number of benefits that result from the formation of community within a school. The authentic community that is created is characterized by a system of shared values related to the educating of youth,

common schooling activities, traditions, interpersonal relations that demonstrate an "ethos of caring," collegial relationships among staff members, and an extension of the role of teacher that goes beyond classroom instruction (Barth, 1990; Boyer, 1995; Meier, 2002; Royal & Rossi, 1997; Sergiovanni, 1994).

Authentic communities develop when a number of conditions are imbedded into a school's policies, practices, and programming. Specific conditions include adult and student engagement in a variety of activities, discussion amongst stakeholders that allows for discovery of common interests and values, and shared responsibility. Problems in the community are addressed and solved by community members. Bureaucratic control is minimized so as not to overregulate shared interests and limit spontaneity (Comeau, 1999).

Community needs to develop over an extended period of years. During these years, community emerges and continually cycles through periods of growth and development (Barth, 1990; Boyer, 1995; Comeau, 1999; Meier, 2002; Royal & Rossi, 1997; Sergiovanni, 1994). Educators need to recognize that community results as individuals learn about each other and focus on a common purpose built around the larger communities' rich and varied expectations and common interests. Educators must begin small, relying on deliberate actions and discussions to begin the process. Principals can begin by modeling community through behavior and temperament (Sergiovanni, 1994). Teachers can further community by coming together as teams or small groups; learning to share; and

developing continuity in curriculum, purpose, and pedagogy. Through these practices, community can gradually grow and develop, a process that can take five to seven years (Boyer, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1994).

It is essential to recognize that an authentic community within a school must be purposeful. A purposeful community reflects the core values, beliefs, and norms that make up the school's culture (Sergiovanni, 1994). A school must have a well-defined, clear, and vital mission that energetically pursues student performance (Boyer, 1995).

DuFour and Eacker (1998) explain that the difference between a purposeful school community and an ordinary school is collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe and what they seek to create. Community purpose is described in the mission statement that clarifies why the school exists. The mission must be articulated with a clarity of purpose by educators willing to accept the responsibility for achieving the purpose.

DuFour and Eacker (1998) further explain that having vision instills in the educators a sense of direction. An effective vision describes a clear future that the school community will be motivated to work toward.

Boyer (1995) contributes to this research by adding that a purposeful school community has sharply focused goals. He explains that the goals must focus on the academic, social, emotional, physical, and moral needs of children or, in his words, "the whole child" (p. 19). The goals of the school give daily purpose and direction to the school. Eacker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002) concur,

adding that goals are the "steps we are going to take and when we are going to take them" (p. 17). They add that goals are designed to produce short-term success and to stretch hopes and aspirations.

Characteristics of an Authentic School Community

Community can develop within a school in a number of forms and with a number of characteristics. Sergiovanni (1994) describes six different forms:

1. Caring communities: members are motivated by an unselfish love that allows for commitment to each other, and the characteristics that define their relationships form community.
2. Learning communities: members are committed to thinking, growing, and inquiry. Learning is an attitude as well as an activity for everyone, students and educators alike.
3. Professional communities: members make a commitment to the continuous development of their expertise and professionalism.
4. Collegial communities: members are tied together for mutual benefit and pursue common goals through a sense of mutual obligation.
5. Inclusive communities: economic, religious, cultural, ethnic, family, and other differences are brought together into a mutually respectful whole.
6. Inquiring communities: educators commit themselves to a spirit of collective inquiry as they reflect on their practice and search for solutions to problems.

Within any school, a combination of these forms of community may exist. In an ideal setting, each of these forms are present. There are a number of characteristics that are common to each form.

In schools with strong community, there is a commitment to a healthy development of students' social, emotional, academic, and ethical growth (Schaps, 2002). The community focuses on meeting students' needs, ensuring that students feel physically and psychologically safe (Schaps, 2002), have a sense of belonging, and feeling connected (Raywid, 1996). Students are well known and educators demonstrate a high regard and respect for all students (Raywid, 1996; Schaps, 2001). Often the relationship between students and adults is strengthened due to increased positive interactions (Meier, 2002). Educators set high expectations for academic achievement fused with a high degree of care (Royal & Rossi, 1997).

Students in a school community have opportunities to connect positively with their peers (Schaps, 2001). A number of strategies are used to foster peer relationships. Strategies include conflict resolution, cooperative learning, multiage grouping, and peer tutoring (Raywid, 1996; Schaps, 2001). The expectation is that students will treat each other with respect and real concern, not that they necessarily become friends (Schaps, 2002). As a result, educators set high expectations for student behavior by increasing student responsibility for their own behavior (Ferrandino & Tirozzi, 2001; Royal & Rossi, 1997). Students also have a significant voice in decision making and problem solving (Ferrandino & Tirozzi, 2001; Raywid, 1996; Schaps, 2001).

Schools that are communities have strong leadership that builds community within the staff as well as the students. School leaders provide support and structure for staff members to improve student work and take time to reflect (Downs, 2004; Meier, 2002). Leaders talk with teachers about learning and teaching. They support the goals of the community and screen new hires to ensure that these individuals will also support the goals (Downs, 2004).

Parents and caregivers are encouraged to be active participants in schools that are communities. They are considered to be part of the educational team that results in them developing an understanding of the school program (Ferrandino & Tirozzi, 2001). In doing so, educators create a link with families that supports the growth and learning of every student (Schaps, 2002).

The imbedding of community within a school has been shown to have significant impact on student success. Research indicates that a strong sense of community can lead to greater achievement gains and improved test scores (Royal & Rossi, 1997; Schaps, 2001). Educators find that they are able to create a learning environment that allows for effective school renewal when they combined curricular changes with high expectations, again influencing student success (Royal & Rossi, 1997; Schaps, 2001). Community building should become, at a minimum, a strong complement to the increased focus on academic achievement (Schaps, 2003).

Ackerman, Donaldson, and Bogert (1996) identify broader community characteristics similar to those previously listed. They further explain that these characteristics need to become community values that educators need to trust in

if community is to be effective. These include modeling democracy; creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts; nurturing healthier relations for educators and students; breaking away from isolation in order to generate greater trust, communications, support, and camaraderie; and meeting the leader's needs.

They point out that educators need to trust in these four characteristics to create a collaborative community that enables community members to become productive partners. Educators need to have faith in the community to problem solve and meet challenges within the realm of these characteristics in order to develop constructive actions and develop mutual support to carry out those actions (Ackerman et al., 1996).

Another important aspect of community building is the impact that occurs when it is absent from a school setting or when community is neglected. Sergiovanni (1994) states that the "need for community becomes urgent when we go on to consider its loss" (p. 10). He goes on to explain that when students do not experience or lose a sense of community they have two options. The first is to create a substitute for the loss. Students are able to find substitutes but often these are unhealthy or dysfunctional, such as finding community within a gang. The second option for students who do not have a connection to community is to remain unattached. This may result in isolation and distrust. Students may become guarded and feel rejected. The result is a sense of abandonment and a reluctance to form human attachments (Sergiovanni, 1994).

Community can be lost when educators have an overriding concern for test scores and standards (Meier, 2002; Schaps, 2001). Schools that focus solely on the academic growth of students fail to incorporate all aspects of a student's development. Educators cannot rely solely on test scores to lead reform. Building community in school; establishing an engaging, challenging curriculum; and setting high standards for students is a more feasible and sustainable reform strategy (Schaps, 2001).

Classroom Community

Most of the research on schools as communities focuses on the whole school. An additional part of the research looks at the development of community within the elementary school classroom. Due to the traditional arrangement of elementary schools, students in one self-contained classroom with one teacher for the greater extent of the day, the development of community is within the classroom setting.

Classrooms that embody the characteristics of community can be defined as caring classrooms. Educators in these classrooms seek to build student habits that create a culture of caring; a moment-by-moment practice of kindness, generosity, and compassion (Levine, 2003). Caring classrooms teach and model beliefs and behaviors that contribute to an emotionally safe community (Bluestein, 2001; Levine, 2003).

Bluestein (2001) identifies basic student needs that educators must address in order to create an emotionally safe classroom:

- need for success: Students have opportunities for success based on their personal level of ability.
- need for individuality: Educators attempt to determine student interests and motivation while recognizing his or her learning style.
- need for recognition, attention, and emotional safety: Students' positive behaviors are reinforced by allowing positive outcomes to occur. Teachers attempt to stay aware of changes in students' performance and behavior.
- need for power and control: Educators encourage the development of students' decision making and self-management skills.
- need for respect, belonging, and dignity: Students' worth is not defined by their behavior or achievement. Students' mistakes are simply opportunities for new learning.
- need for positive consequences, structure, limits, and follow-through: Boundaries and policies clearly describe acceptable student and staff behavior.

The focus of classroom standards becomes central to the culture of the classroom. Establishing a culture of high standards needs to include high standards for kindness and cooperation as well as academic standards (Oldfather, 1992). Educators need to model within the classroom the standards they expect of students, therefore becoming as much of a learner as the students (Berger, 1997).

The classroom culture transcends into the school culture, making the two one and the same. It provides a framework for social interactions and academic growth throughout the entire school (Berger, 1997).

Approaches to creating classroom community vary and often are left to the pedagogical practices of the classroom teacher. Educators often equate the development of classroom community to classroom management. Although the two concepts work together, developing community furthers the teaching of self-control and participation. Through the development of the classroom community, students learn to take better care of themselves, of each other, and of their classroom. Community development is not a waste of instructional time (Gimbert, 2002).

Charney (2002) further explains that the development of classroom community is manifested in a positive manner, in the learning of discipline. Discipline is an act of learning, not of punishment. In order to teach discipline, two fundamental elements are required, empathy and structure. The teaching of discipline has two basic goals, the creation of self-control and the creation of community.

The creation of self-control is the power to assert oneself in a positive way (Charney, 2002). It involves the ability to regulate oneself, anticipate consequences, give up immediate gratification, and realize long-term goals. With the creation of self-control, a child is able to act on ideas, plan, solve problems, and make decisions (Charney, 2002).

In order to create community, students within a classroom move beyond the domain of self and learn to find connections with others. They learn to feel themselves as members of a number of groups. Not only do they learn to feel a sense of belonging, they also learn that they can contribute to a group as well. Creating community gives children the power to care (Charney, 2002).

Charney (2002) outlines a number of principles that guide the development of community within the classroom:

- In classroom communities, the social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.
- How children learn is as important as what they learn.
- Cognitive growth develops through social interaction.
- Children need to develop cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control in order to be successful socially and academically.
- Educators need to know the children they teach–individually, culturally, and developmentally.
- Educators know the families of the children they teach and invite their participation.
- The adults in the school must be able to work together.

In order to establish a caring classroom environment, educators must be empathetic and responsive to children's thinking and feelings. A caring, responsive classroom community that honors students' voice can encourage

students to take ownership in their learning and alleviate negative perceptions that interfere with student success (Oldfather, 1992).

The research on schools and classrooms as communities illustrates the impact of community building and development within a school and classroom. The research clearly indicates that the benefits are student centered but also supportive of innovative and progressive teaching practices. Clearly, the development of a school and classroom community furthers the social, emotional, and academic growth of students.

School Size

An issue that frequently surfaces in the research on successful schools and in the literature on school community is school size (Meier, 2002; Raywid, 1996). The research on school size is extensive. Proponents of small schools point to a number of academic, social, and emotional benefits for students and promote the building and development of small schools. The benefits appear to be extensive and overwhelmingly support educational reform through the development of small schools.

Small schools are not common within the United States. Large schools are the norm and continue to be used and built. Nationwide, 25% of secondary schools have more than 1,000 students. Los Angeles and Miami have high schools of over 5,000 students (Allen, 2000). More than 70% of U.S. high school students attend schools of more than 1,000, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Despite a 70% population growth in the United States between 1940

and 1990, the number of elementary and secondary schools declined from 200,000 to 62,037 (Cotton, 1996; Robertson, 2001).

A number of definitions of small schools exist. Small elementary schools are generally defined as schools with student populations of 400 or fewer (Mitchell, 2000; Wasley, 2001). Small high schools are defined as having 100 students per grade (Vander Ark, 2002) or 400 to 800 students (Cotton, 1996). The Office of Small Schools (Chicago Public Schools, 2003) indicates small high schools as having no more than 500 students and small elementary schools no more than 350. Lee and Smith (1996) state that high schools should be larger, at 600-900 students, in order to establish curricular diversity. Small school advocates such as Meier (1996) believe that small schools should not exceed 300 students. When interviewed, Toch, a researcher funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, stated that a school should be small enough so that students know their teachers and teachers know their students (as cited in Fording, 2003). For the purpose of this study, small schools are defined as having 400 students or fewer.

Small School Characteristics

A number of small school characteristics have been identified through research. Many of these characteristics may be found in schools of all sizes. In small schools, these characteristics have been confirmed to have a positive effect on student attitudes and satisfaction towards education, attendance, and student achievement (Fowler, 1992; Howley & Bickel, 2002). The characteristics

offer educators insight on strategies that can be developed to create an effective learning environment.

Small schools are autonomous (Anderson, 1998; Cotton, 1996; Meier, 1996; Raywid, 2002; Wasley, 2001). Autonomy gives educators in the school a sense of ownership. The small school community has the primary authority to make decisions affecting the important aspects of the school. This includes, but is not limited to, decisions regarding budget, curriculum, scheduling, and personnel matters (Cotton, 1996). The governance of the school is easier and more effective since it involves the principal and teachers working together (Meier, 1996). Small schools have the best chance for success when they are permitted to become autonomous–separate entities with their own culture (Irmsher, 1997).

Small schools are personal. Students are well known by the educators in the school (Cotton, 1996; Raywid, 1996; Vander Ark, 2002). As a result, a personalized program is developed to meet the students' needs. A relationship forms between the staff, students, and parents or caregivers that spans several years (Mitchell, 2000; Wasley, 2001). Students and teachers form a relationship built on the teacher's understanding of the student's interests, strengths, and weaknesses. A coaching and mentoring relationship is established that enables the teacher to set high standards for each student (Wagner, 2001).

A strong sense of community emerges in small schools. Every student, not just the academic and athletic stars, is a part of a community, including the adults (Meier, 1996). Within the community, students are not anonymous and do

not fall through the cracks. Instead, an attitude of collegiality exists amongst all members of the school; staff with staff, students with staff, and students with students (Wagner, 2001). Small schools allow for greater flexibility that results in simplifying the organization and not simplifying the students (Meier, 1996).

Parents are less likely to be intimidated by small schools (Meier, 1996). Parents, teachers, and students work together as educational partners, communicating frequently on the student's progress and educational techniques. Parents' questions and concerns are welcomed and encouraged (Mitchell, 2000; Wagner, 2001; Wasley, 2001).

Teachers function as a team in small schools, creating a professional community. They do not work in isolation and work together for the benefit of the students. There is a bonding that occurs that is both collegial and friendly. Mutual respect becomes the norm because people know one another well enough to understand their skills and values (Fine & Sommerville, 1998; Meier, 1996; Wagner, 2001).

Findings

A number of findings on school size have emerged. The findings indicate that small schools have a number of attributes that affect student learning (Robertson, 2001). They suggest that small schools nurture the development of school community, "engaging active student involvement through a positive, humane, and caring atmosphere" (Lashway, 1998, p. 1).

Within small schools, students demonstrate stronger attachment, persistence, and performance (Cotton, 1996; Wasley, 2001). This is identified by

students' better attendance, significantly lower dropout rates, and high grade point averages in small schools. Students fail fewer courses and demonstrate persistence while working toward graduation. In small elementary schools, fewer students are retained in the same grade than in the larger schools (Wasley, 2001).

Students in small schools demonstrate improvements on standardized tests. Reading scores have increased in small schools as demonstrated by improved scores on reading tests (Wasley, 2001). Scores on other standardized tests remain steady or show improvements. Studies confirm that, overall, students in small schools demonstrate higher achievement, learning more and better in small schools (Howley & Bickel, 2002; Huitt, 1998; Lee & Smith, 1996; McMullan, Sipe, & Wolf, 1994).

Small schools reduce the harmful effects of poverty on student achievement (Howley & Bickel, 2002). Research provides evidence that disadvantaged elementary students benefit from a small school environment that eases the negative influences of background characteristics (Howley & Bickel, 2002).

Small schools have lower incidents of violence. The isolation and alienation often associated with teen violence in large schools is minimized by the relationships that develop between adults and students in the school (Lee & Smith, 1996; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992; Wasley, 2001). The development of community has led to fewer incidents of violence. The values of a democratic society are fostered and conflict management is exercised (Wasley, 2001).

There is a greater satisfaction on the part of parents and community members with small schools. Through increased family involvement, a productive relationship with school staff is developed. The same holds true for community members and business leaders. As these individuals are included in the school, they understand the school's function and develop positive relationships (Wasley, 2001).

The professional community is stronger in small schools. Teachers in small schools are more likely to report a strong professional community and greater job satisfaction. Teachers become engaged in more professional development opportunities and work together building cross graded educational programs for students. Teachers in small schools report that the environment is invigorating and creative, leaving them feeling recommitted to the profession (Wasley, 2001).

While small school proponents identify positive attributes of small schools, opponents point out that economic and curricular factors in large schools need to be considered. Large schools are presumed to operate more efficiently than small schools and offer a wider array of programs and courses to students (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001).

Research does not support claims that large schools are more economically efficient. Duke and Trautvetter (2001) point out that there are no optimal school size studies available. In a comprehensive review of the school size research literature, there is little support for the benefits of economics to school size (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001).

Another argument provided against small schools is that students are more racially mixed in larger schools. While this argument has value, small, urban schools can develop open enrollment policies or develop magnet programs to encourage attendance of a diverse student population.

Are Small Schools Better?

Many educators believe that small schools are better for students (Ayers et al., 2000; Robertson, 2001). The research indicates that smallness is a means to success (Fording, 2003).

When educators and communities look toward small school development as a means for school improvement and reform, a number of cautions need to be considered. Downsizing alone cannot guarantee that school transformation will occur. Smallness is believed to be necessary, but not a sufficient condition for improvement (Wasley, 2001).

Small schools are fragile. They are interdependent on educators who work within the school. When an educator leaves, it is difficult to find an appropriate replacement (Ayers et al., 2000; Wasley, 2001).

Small schools must be supported within and outside the larger school system. This includes support from district officials (Meier, 2002; Wasley, 2001). This support needs to come through an understanding of the school's mission and time for the development of curriculum. Support can also come from external sponsors who provide resources and assistance and become a part of the school's community (Wasley, 2001).

Small schools are not the panacea nor the ultimate solution to school improvement and reform (Ayers et al., 2000; Wasley, 2001). They are an essential component of a comprehensive plan to improve education. Smallness allows for better operations and functioning, but does not guarantee it (Robertson, 2001).

Small Learning Communities

A school is not the same as a school building (Ayers et al., 2000). In an effort to benefit from the attributes of small schools, educators have developed small schools within larger school buildings. This approach allows school officials to offer education in small, separate communities while utilizing existing school buildings. A significant amount of research has been completed on developing schools within schools or small learning communities (Cotton, 2001; Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Raywid, 1996).

A school within a school or small learning community is defined as a separate learning unit within a larger school setting. It is a small unit of students and educators who are members of a larger group of students and educators who operate as a separate entity from the larger whole. The school within a school or small learning community embraces the attributes of a small school and at the same time enjoys the benefits of the larger school. Students and teachers are scheduled together and frequently have a common area within a school building (Cotton, 1996, 2001). For the purpose of this study, in an effort to encompass the many broad types of school within a school or small learning communities, the term "small learning community" is used.

A number of common characteristics found in small learning communities include the following:

1. Autonomy: Small learning communities are autonomous and separate. They maintain as much control over governance and operations as possible. A small learning community implements its own program with its own staff and operates on its own budget. Students and staff are in the small learning community by choice and therefore believe in and support the program. Leadership and decision making are shared amongst all stakeholders (Cotton, 2001; Raywid, 1996). Although the building principal may oversee the program, the school within a school or small learning community usually reports directly to a district official (Cotton, 2001; Raywid, 1996).
2. Identity: Small learning communities establish a vision and mission and set goals that provide the foundations for all decisions and create a unique identity. The vision and mission are founded on students' needs within each unique small learning community. Curriculum and instructional approaches are organized around a thematic focus. Individuals, students, and staff members self-select participation in the small learning community (Cotton, 2001).
3. Personalization: Personalization is the effort on the part of educators to get to know students' individual needs and characteristics. They are then able to develop flexible instructional practices and organize the learning environment around the students' needs (Jenkins & Keefe,

2000). Within a small learning community, every student is well known. Students have greater involvement in co-curricular end extracurricular activities. Educators develop relationships with students that extend over more than one year. Another part of personalization is the high level of involvement parents and community members are invited to take in the small learning community (Cotton, 2001; Vander Ark, 2002).

4. Instructional Focus: The focus of instruction in a small learning community is geared toward high expectations and the academic achievement of all students. Students are grouped heterogeneously in order to serve all students equally. Educators work in collaborative teams, relying on each other's observations and input. Professional development centers on student achievement and strategies to improve instruction (Cotton, 2001).
5. Accountability: Students within a small learning community demonstrate progress on state and local assessments as well as the goals of the small learning community. Using multiple forms of assessment, students are required to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Educators in small learning communities make connections with other educators in small learning communities within the same district in order to ensure continuous progress (Cotton, 2001).

These five characteristics describe the small learning community as it would be in a perfect working model. Operating the school within a school or small learning community to this extreme is rare. Instead, the school within a

school or small learning community is a restructuring process and not truly a new school. This restructuring is a challenge to old relationships and patterns of operation that requires cultural change that is difficult and uncomfortable (Raywid, 1996).

The optimal size of a small learning community is dependent on the type of program being offered, the rationale for the program, the size of the school building, and resources available (Sicoli, 2000). Some programs have between 30 to 80 students while others may include 100 to 200 students (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Raywid, 1996).

Grouping Practices of Small Learning Communities

An important characteristic of small schools that small learning communities attempt to emulate is personalization. Many of the benefits of small learning communities are attributed to personalization. When teachers are familiar with students' personal lives as well as their skill levels and interests, students are no longer anonymous or lost in the crowd. Instead, closer personal relationships between teachers and students may reduce student apathy and improve student performance (Moles, 2003).

Small learning communities offer students and teachers a means for developing greater personalization through student grouping practices. Through the use of looping, multiage classes, and cross graded programming, students have opportunities to work with teachers over two or more years. Each of these grouping practices allows teachers to build relationships with students over an extended period of time.

Looping is a multiyear approach to student grouping. Through looping, students remain in the same class with the same teacher for two or more consecutive years.

Looping offers both students and teachers a number of benefits. Through looping, a teacher has an extended period of time to learn about his or her students. The multiyear model supports and sustains relationships between teachers and students and students with other students (Checkley, 1995). Teachers learn more about a student's strengths and weaknesses over two years and, as a result, may be able to influence and improve a student's performance (George, 1987).

Looping encourages a stronger sense of community (Checkley, 1995). Students are able to develop social skills and cooperative group strategies as they develop long-term relationships with other students in their class (George, 1987). Teachers not only create relationships with students, but also with their parents and families (Checkley, 1995).

Through looping, teachers develop a broader understanding of the curriculum and how it builds from year to year. Looping strengthens accountability and increases instructional efficiency (Moles, 2003).

Another approach to student grouping found in small learning communities is multiage classes. Multiage classes group students of varying ages and grade levels together into one class. This approach allows younger and older students to work together and learn from each other. Older students are able to model appropriate behavior and teach younger students. As a result, older students

reinforce skills through practice and at the same time experience greater self-esteem (Kinsey, 2001). Younger students have the opportunity to expand their skills through interaction with older students who provide assistance and support. Younger students also have the opportunity to become involved in an integrated curriculum that provides a scaffolding of growth opportunities (Kinsey, 2001).

Multiage grouping provides students with positive socioemotional development. Students in multiage classrooms demonstrate positive attitude toward school, greater leadership skills, and increased social development (Kinsey, 2001). They may also experience the benefits of looping. When a student enters the multiage setting as a younger student, he or she remains with the same teacher for two or more consecutive years, thus creating a looping experience.

Cross graded programming is a student grouping approach similar to multiage grouping. For the purpose of this study, cross graded grouping is the combining of classrooms of different grades. This occurs when two or more single grade classrooms combine the students together, forming cross graded student groups. Cross graded programming allow students in a small learning community to work together even when they are not in the same classroom. This approach offers a peer tutoring experience. When students work in cross grade groups, they benefit by learning academic skills, developing social behaviors, and the enhancement of peer relations (Kalkowski, 2001).

Students involved in cross graded programming are able to expand their relationships with teachers in the small learning community. Teachers learn about students they may work with in the future and offer insight to other teachers about students they have already had in class. Cross graded programming expands the students' community beyond the classroom.

Types of Small Learning Communities

There are a variety of approaches through which small learning communities can be structured. To develop an effective approach for downsizing a large school, a plan needs to be selected and modified to meet the needs of the school, district curriculum and standards, and to fit the design of the current building. Within the research, there are a number of structures that are consistently identified. These include academies, house plans, mini schools, magnet schools, and schools within a school (Cotton, 2001; McAndrews & Anderson, 2002; US Department of Education, 2002).

Academies are subgroups within schools that are organized around themes (US Department of Education, 2002). They may also be referred to as theme-based schools or focus schools (Cotton, 2001). Often, these small learning communities are found in high schools, although they may be used in elementary settings as well. An example of an academy would be a career academy where students focus on school to work activities. Academies are usually autonomous and are located in their own space either within or outside the larger school.

House plans is another approach to creating a small learning community. This approach was first used within the United Kingdom (McAndrews & Anderson, 2002). Students in houses are assigned to a smaller grouping within a school and take most of their classes together and share the same teachers. It usually exists within the normal departmentalization of the larger school and curriculum is consistent with the rest of the school (Raywid, 1996). House plans may be designed by grade level or encompass more than one grade level. Each house usually has its own discipline plan, student governance, and social activities (US Department of Education, 2002). The houses are under the governance of the larger school and share the school's resources (Cotton, 2001; Raywid, 1996).

Mini schools are very similar to houses, as groups of students remain together and work together with the same teachers. The change is that a separate curriculum is used as well as alternative instructional techniques. Like the house, a mini-school is under the authority of the larger school (Raywid, 1996).

Magnet schools are small learning communities that have a single focus, such as math, science, or technology, which attracts students from across the entire district. The small learning communities are highly specialized and may have admissions requirements for selections of students (Cotton, 2001; US Department of Education, 2002).

A school within a school is a separate entity within a larger school building but is autonomous, operating its own budget and planning its own curriculum and

programs (Raywid, 1996). The school within a school has its own culture, personnel, and students (US Department of Education, 2002). Although the school within a school is reliant on the host school for safety procedures and building operations, it is generally responsible to the district (US Department of Education, 2002).

Each of these structures allows large schools to optimize the benefits of small schools as long as the techniques are used appropriately.

Challenges of Successful Implementation of Small Learning Communities

The development of small learning communities requires extensive work and dedication on the part of educators hoping to implement this approach for creating an intimate, effective learning community. Changing to a small learning community requires adult learning as well as student learning. It also requires patience and time. Small learning communities do not happen within the first week, month, or even year of implementation. They are an evolving entity that continues to develop and grow over time (Cotton, 2001).

One of the first challenges is realizing the need for change and not confusing it with how to change. To begin the process, educators need to develop a vision and mission for the small learning community. As stated earlier, vision instills in educators a sense of direction and clarifies the resulting student success if they remain true to the school's mission (DuFour & Eacker, 1998). Ongoing discussions among educators about change and a new vision is an essential first step (Fullan, 2001).

Recognizing adult issues is important in the initial planning stages. There is a substantial learning curve that adults experience as they begin planning and implementing small learning communities. Teams made up of quality relationships need to learn to work together. Successful small learning community teams need to develop a collegial culture. Teachers need to learn to be colleagues and critical friends (Meier, 2002). Despite efforts to transition to small learning communities, problems can arise. Within a school, a small learning community can create divisiveness among staff members and result in contention (Muncey & McQuillan, 1991).

Organization of a small learning community takes time and careful planning. The Small Schools Workshop–educators, organizers, and researchers who are based out of the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago–collaborates with educators to create small learning communities in public schools. Through ongoing research, this group has identified a number of key points necessary to planning and implementing a small learning community.

- the development of an integrated and aligned curriculum that requires developing a main theme and coherent focus.
- building a professional community and selecting teams of educators to work together. Educators need to be cohesive and work collaboratively to meet the needs of their students.
- shared leadership and investment by educators in the school.
- development of a consistent educational experience for students that extends beyond one year.

- attracting students to the program within the small learning community that requires a recruiting process that involves presenting information in a variety of ways such as printed brochures and meetings. Educators want to encourage students and parents to self-select the program and buy into the vision and mission of the small learning community.

Educators must recognize that the process will be slow. Phasing into small learning communities over a period of two to three years can help with the messiness that accompanies the changes. Accepting the realities of change and the subsequent confusion and frustration is an important part of the process for educators.

Summary

Developing a small learning community may be a means of improving students' learning and achievement. Making the decision to divide a large school into small learning communities offers educators a means for personalizing education and focusing on student learning. Small learning communities are sustained through the ongoing process of implementation, continual development, and evolving practices (Cotton, 2001).

A review of the research literature on school culture, community, and school size identifies how each of these components contrib..es to an effective learning environment that encourages student social, emotional, and academic achievement. A thorough examination of the research identifies common factors

that, when drawn together, create the rationale for the development of small learning communities.

Culture exists in all aspects of society and is present in every school. Education is the means through which society advances beliefs, values, and norms. In schools, culture is transmitted covertly and overtly. When it is covert, it is learned through observation and repetitive involvement in activities and behaviors. Transmitting culture in an overt manner is deliberate activity in celebrations, ceremonies, and formal practices. Either way, individuals learn that the culture of a school is a pattern of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that determines how individuals think and act.

Schools that are healthy learning environments have healthy cultures that impact student learning. A healthy school culture fosters successful change efforts and builds commitment toward changes that impact pedagogy and, thus, is critical to the success of reform. Within a healthy school culture, academic success is expected.

Culture provides individuals with common beliefs and norms. Community connects individuals to others to work toward a common good (Sergiovanni, 2000). Community offers individuals a connection, a sense of belonging, and prevents isolation. Educators need to examine their schools to determine if the existence of community is authentic or counterfeit. An authentic community that is caring, professional, and collegial contributes to an effective educational environment.

Educators need to make a conscious effort to imbed community into a school in order to have significant impact on student success. Student success occurs when educators build community while making curricular changes that set high expectations. A collaborative community encourages educators to be productive partners.

Classrooms, as well as schools, develop a sense of culture and community, particularly in elementary schools. Classrooms that develop a positive sense of community are identified as caring classrooms where educators develop a culture of caring. Educators who address students' basic need for success, individuality, recognition, and respect develop an emotionally safe classroom. Students in this environment are able to realize positive social, emotional, and academic growth. The classroom culture ultimately transcends into the larger school culture ultimately making the two the same.

Research also identifies school size as an important factor in developing successful schools. Small school benefits are extensive and support the development of community and educational reform. A number of characteristics of small schools contribute to the development of an effective educational environment. These include a strong sense of community, personalized attention towards students, and close student and teacher relationships. Teachers are able to work together collaboratively and find they can build curriculum across grade levels and disciplines. A small school offers parents greater opportunities for involvement in their child's educational program and allows for a closer relationship with educators.

Findings on small schools indicate that small schools have a number of attributes that affect students' learning. Students in small schools attend school regularly and are less likely to drop out of high school. Students receive academic assistance that encourages persistence and perseverance. This factor is particularly significant for students of poverty or who are at risk of failing. There is a lower incidence of violence in small schools that is attributed to the fostering of community.

Educators hoping to realize the benefits of a small school while remaining in a large building have developed small learning communities. Small learning communities are separate learning units in a larger school in which a small group of educators and students operate as a separate entity from the larger whole. The small learning community allows students and educators to embrace small school attributes while benefiting from the larger school environment. Educators find that research demonstrates that small learning communities are a means for addressing the need for an effective learning environment that encourages student learning and achievement.

Educators want further information on the development of small learning communities. To implement small learning communities, educators need further research to determine the most effective organizational models and effective practices.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Introduction

Chapter III explains the methodology used to investigate small learning communities in three Minnesota elementary schools, criteria for selection of the three elementary schools, and research questions posed by the researcher. Through the literature review, characteristics of small learning communities were identified and provided criteria for selection of the schools.

Design

This study examines data collected by the researcher in fall 2003 during an internship with Dr. Larry Nybladh, Superintendent of the Moorhead (Minnesota) Public Schools. The researcher compiled the data collected during the internship on the establishment and operational practices of three current Minnesota elementary schools' small learning communities, housed within large enrollment-sized schools. The data were sought by the Moorhead elementary educators developing small learning communities within their schools.

In March 2002, the Moorhead Public Schools in Moorhead, Minnesota, passed a referendum funding the construction of two new schools, a new middle school and a new elementary school, and allowed for the renovation of two former junior high schools into elementary schools. Three elementary schools,

each housing 700 to 800 students, were a result of the renovations. District stakeholders, including educators, community members and parents, desired a means to deliver elementary education in a positive, nurturing environment similar to the environments that existed in the former elementary sites with smaller building enrollments.

A District Design Team was established and included district principals, elementary classroom teachers, specialists, assistant superintendents of curriculum and finance, support staff, and parents. The District Design Team supported developing small learning communities within the new schools. Their rationale was that the new schools would maintain a personalized approach to education. Children and parents would be familiar to one another and strong relationships would develop between school personnel and families (C. Beech, personal communication, June 24, 2002). School personnel believed they could create the small learning community environment within the larger enrollment schools. They believed the small learning community would establish a school environment/culture to meet the educational needs of all students.

Specific data sought by the Moorhead district concerned details about starting small learning communities, scheduling, the amount of time, funding, and work needed to initiate the program and the roles of teachers and principals. The Moorhead district planned to replicate practices and procedures implemented in other districts. As Moorhead educators experienced the emotion of change (loss, insecurity, conflict, guilt, and confusion), they needed to have an understanding

of what other educators had experienced in order to accept and implement the "what, how, and why" of the new teaching method (Evans, 1996; Palmer, 1998).

Educators do not view school change, such as the move to small learning communities, as an abstract phenomenon (Evans, 1996). They want to know how the initiative would work at this time, with their current students, and in a new school building. Moorhead educators focused on qualitative data for answers to their concerns, but also desired a sense of reassurance that the development of small learning communities was an educational initiative that they could implement.

Procedures and Methodology

The District Design Team created a list of beliefs (Appendix A) members agreed needed to be adhered to as a new small learning community design was developed. Keeping the concerns of the staff and parents in mind, the committee first developed a definition and a design of a small learning community. From their research, they coordinated a small learning community design that reflected the Moorhead school district's educational philosophy, beliefs, and values. They selected organizational practices that facilitated a small learning community design to support the Moorhead school district's needs.

The data collected from the three small learning communities, within large enrollment-sized Minnesota elementary schools, facilitated the development of the small learning communities in Moorhead's elementary schools. Qualitative research methods were uniquely suited for this research because Moorhead district educators wanted specific data and perceptions of elementary teachers

and principals on practices utilized by educators who had developed small learning communities. The qualitative design included developing questions specific to the literature on effective characteristics of small learning communities. The research design included open forum type of questions, descriptive questions, and semi-structured questions. The research questions were developed and designed by the researcher, based on a review of current literature and research on the characteristics of effective small learning communities, and with input from members of the Moorhead Public Schools District Design Team. The questions were developed to provide the information the educators were seeking. The questions pertained to facilities, grade level configuration, themes, characteristics, planning, practices, opportunities, benefits, organizational structures, and misconceptions of small learning communities.

The research design included interviews with teachers and administrators at the elementary school sites. Observations by the researcher were also a component of the research design. At each site, the researcher visited classrooms and observed daily activities of teachers, school principals, and other educators.

Documents were collected to support interview responses and observations. A variety of printed materials were collected from the three schools. These included, but were not limited to, staff and student handbooks, newsletters, staff memos, newspaper articles, school promotional brochures, and letters to parents.

Chronological Description of the Process

During the internship, the researcher followed a series of steps to assess the needs of educators planning to develop small learning communities in elementary schools.

1. A needs assessment was completed. The needs assessment was developed by the researcher from the literature review (Appendix B). It included a framework for the collection and reporting of data.
2. An Elementary Configuration Task Force was organized to evaluate the district's elementary program and determine how small learning communities would be developed. The researcher organized the Elementary Configuration Task Force meetings and learned about the concerns related to transitioning to small learning communities.
3. The researcher identified three Minnesota schools currently using small learning communities. The researcher provided the Implementation Team and the Elementary Configuration Task Force with information about each school that was used to generate questions about the small learning communities.
4. A letter of introduction (Appendix C) was sent via email to the principal of each school explaining the need to learn more about the school's small learning community. A request to visit each school and conduct interviews was included in the letter. Permission was granted by each building principal.

5. The researcher developed a set of formal questions to ask educators at each school based on input from members of the District Design Team and the Implementation Team. The Implementation Team reviewed the questions, making changes and additions. A final set of questions was developed (Appendix D).
6. The researcher scheduled dates and times to visit each school site and conduct interviews. Visits to all the schools were conducted over a two-week period.
7. While visiting each school, the researcher conducted formal interviews with the school principal and teachers.
8. The researcher was allowed to tour each school and make facility observations.
9. Documents and artifacts were collected that further explained the development of the small learning communities.
10. Following the site visits, the researcher presented information on each site to the Elementary Configuration Task Force, school district officials, and elementary educators. A PowerPoint presentation was developed to detail the information (Appendix E).
11. Analysis of the information was completed through which detailed themes and descriptions of small learning communities in large Minnesota elementary schools emerged. The Implementation Team reviewed the research and made a final recommendation (Appendix F) for the establishment of small learning communities in Moorhead.

Schools and Participants

Schools selected for this study had student enrollments of 500 to 800, as described on the Minnesota Department of Education website. Out of these schools, those with small learning communities in their schools were identified through school district websites. The final three schools were selected because each had unique small learning communities.

Each of the selected schools housed a small learning community that was a unit of students and educators who were members of a larger group of students and educators who operate as a separate entity from the larger whole (Cotton, 2001). Each incorporated characteristics of a small school while continuing to be a part of the larger school. Each small learning community was unique and different from the other two within this study.

School A was located 70 miles outside the Minneapolis metropolitan area. The school is a new building in its second year of operation. The building houses Elementary Education, Community Education, Early Childhood Family Education, and Early Childhood Special Education. Each of these programs is autonomous of the elementary program and each operates on its own schedule and budget. The building was built in a series of sections in which there are smaller houses or wings. The elementary school section houses approximately 800 students, kindergarten through fifth grade. Within this section of the building, there are small clusters of rooms that include classrooms surrounding a small multi-purpose room and a teacher resource room. Each of these clusters forms a small learning community made up of students in a single grade level.

School B is located in a suburb of Minneapolis. The school, built in 1952, houses 510 students. The building, although older, has been renovated and maintained, with additions being added over the past few years. The building houses two separate small learning communities. The first small learning community, Program I, is a continuous progress program where students work with two teamed teachers over five years. Grades one through three are in one classroom and grades four and five are in the corresponding classroom next door. The corresponding classrooms pair and mix for instruction with the two teachers.

The other small learning community within School B is Program II. In this program, students are in a single grade level classroom and remain with the same class and teacher for two consecutive years. This process is referred to as looping. Teachers work in paired teams that allow for cross grade activities. After the second year, students are remixed and, again, loop with the same class and teacher for two consecutive years.

School C is in a suburb of Minneapolis located southwest of the metropolitan area. The school opened in 1996 and has a student enrollment of 690 students. The building was built in six separate small learning communities. In each, there is a cluster of classrooms surrounding a large, open, shared learning area. Within each community, students are placed in single grade rooms and loop or remain with the same class and teacher for two consecutive years. Each community is unique and is made up of a series of consecutive grade levels. There is a kindergarten through second grade community, a

kindergarten through fourth grade community, a first through second grade community, a first through fourth grade community, a third through sixth grade community, and a fifth through sixth grade community.

Instruments and Protocols

Multiple sources of information, including interviews, documents, and observations, were used to gather data for the study.

Interviews

Teachers and the building principal in each of the three schools were asked a series of open-ended questions by the researcher (Appendix D). The questions were designed by the researcher, based on a review of the literature, research on small learning communities, and with input from members of the Moorhead Public Schools District Design Team. The researcher recorded notes to provide the information educators were seeking.

The researcher made a second review of the recorded notes for the purpose of this study. Common responses from each school were color coded by the varying characteristics of the small learning communities. The codes identified initiation and development of the small learning communities, levels of teacher and administrative involvement, philosophical beliefs of educators, and practices implemented in the small learning communities. Once identified and coded, the findings formed common themes.

Documents

A variety of printed materials were collected from the three schools. These included, but were not limited to, team meeting minutes, staff and student

handbooks, newsletters, staff memos, newspaper articles, and letters to parents. The documents provided the researcher and the Moorhead school district with information regarding process and communication for implementation of small learning communities.

Observations

At each site, the researcher visited classrooms and observed daily activities of teachers, school principals, and other educators. Observation notes were recorded and matched to responses from the interview questions. Observations also allowed the researcher to note facilities, classroom design, and daily schedules. The researcher was able to observe practices implemented in the small learning communities.

Data Collection

Additional data were collected through the Minnesota Department of Education on each of the schools. These data included student and staff demographics, information on state testing results, and findings on the state school report card. Data specific to each school were collected through individual interviews with teachers and the principal. Further data collection was completed through classroom observations, review of documents, and artifacts.

State demographics are reported on October 1 of each year in Minnesota through the Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS) report. This report is a collection of student data used by the Minnesota Department of Education to calculate state aid and levy, federal grant allocations, state civil rights reporting, unduplicated child count, and report of the National Center for

Education Statistics. For the purpose of this study, information on the three school districts' demographics was collected through MARSS. This information provided a comprehensive overview of the districts' and elementary schools' sizes. Additional information collected through MARSS included total student population, the ethnic and racial student population, students receiving free and reduced lunch, and information on the number of students receiving special services through Special Education and English as a Second Language instruction.

Data relevant to the educators in each school were collected as well. This included educators' level of education and salary.

The State of Minnesota requires elementary students in grades three and five to take the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA) in order to comply with federal mandates established by legislation. The MCA is given in February each year and, while providing a snapshot of each student's progress, is used primarily to determine if a school is demonstrating adequate yearly progress in the areas of reading, mathematics, and writing (fifth grade only). Student scores are ranked into five levels. These levels for the 2002-2003 school year are as follows:

Level I: Students at this level have gaps in the knowledge and some of the skills necessary to do satisfactory work.

Level IIa: Students at this level have partial knowledge and some of the skills necessary for achieving satisfactory work.

Level IIb: Most students in this level are working successfully on grade level material and are on track to achieve satisfactory work.

Level III: Students at this level are working above grade level. Many are proficient with challenging subject matter.

Level IV: Students at this level demonstrate superior performance, well beyond what is expected at the grade level (Minnesota Department of Education, 2004).

The MCA scores are used to determine if a school is making adequate yearly progress. Adequate yearly progress is determined by criteria ranked by education officials of the State of Minnesota in four areas. The first area is participation. Each school must test 95% of students in the tested grade. In elementary schools, students in third and fifth grade are tested. The school must have an average daily attendance rate of 90% or show any improvement from the previous year towards meeting this goal. The final area, which elementary schools are exempted, but need to monitor, is graduation. High schools and districts must have an average graduation rate of 80% or show any improvement from the previous year to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements. Schools are required to meet graduation targets in each of these student groups: all students, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, Black, White, Limited English Proficient, Special Education, and students eligible for free and reduced price lunch. Examination of the MCA scores provides an overview of the level of student progress and academic growth.

The Minnesota State Report Card is an accumulation of student and staff demographics, MCA scores, taxation information, and an overview of the school's budget. The report is a source of information for the public on each school's progress and academic achievement. The report card provides a broad profile of each school. Each school receives an academic achievement rating on the report card indicated by stars. Each star represents a series of levels and categories. The categories identify levels of performance.

Minnesota schools are required to demonstrate AYP by meeting goals established by the Minnesota Department of Education. The goals state that in each school, 10% or fewer students must score at the lowest levels on state tests. Each school must perform among the top 25% of comparable schools based on a percentage of test takers eligible for free and reduced priced lunch. The schools must also perform in the top 10% of similar size schools. Finally, 30% or more of the students must score at the highest level on state tests.

The levels report the number of categories a school demonstrates performance in:

- five Stars: meets criteria in two of the five categories listed previously.
- four Stars: meets criteria in one of the five categories listed previously.
- three Stars: making adequate yearly progress.
- two Stars: not making adequate yearly progress this year.
- one Star: not making adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years, not showing sufficient improvement.

Examination of each school's state report cards and demographics provides the reader with background information on the educational environment in which small learning communities have been developed.

Data Analysis

Due to the nature of how the data were collected, a descriptive and explanatory multiple case study was utilized to report the information from each of the three schools. The multiple case study provided a means for exploring the bounded system or specialized program of current activities and operations in each school (Creswell, 1998). The multiple case study also provided a means for analyzing the data while allowing the researcher to "retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin, 2003, p. 2).

Yin (2003) states that the use of a case study is preferred when examining contemporary events. A case study relies on an historical perspective as well as direct observation and interviews. A case study also incorporates a wide variety of evidence such as documents and artifacts. These methods of data collection were utilized when the primary data were collected and, therefore, important to the second review of the findings.

To analyze the data, an inductive analysis was completed. This approach was used because it allowed the researcher to return to the primary data collected during the internship. Since there were no pre-imposed themes developed prior to the school visits, inductive analysis allowed the researcher to identify categories that emerged from the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 1989).

Ordering the data into emerging patterns and themes was completed by identifying similarities and differences. This resulted in "chunks of meaning" (McMillan & Schumacher, 1989, p. 417). These "chunks" proved to be meaningful data that provided answers to the "how" and "why "questions of Moorhead educators and the research questions of the study. A diagram of coding and theme development (Appendix G) further defines the emerging patterns and themes.

A triangulation of the emerging themes allowed for a cross-validation of the data collected. The researcher cross-checked the data by comparing the interviews, observations, and artifacts collected at each school. As a result, three specific themes emerged, common to each school:

Theme I: Teacher involvement and commitment.

Theme II: The principal as an instructional design leader.

Theme III: The instructional design creates a learning community.

Within each of these themes, common practices, procedures, and theoretical beliefs emerged about the development and operation of small learning communities in elementary schools. Educators in the initial stages of preparing to move into small learning communities may be able to use the findings to select practices that facilitate effective development of small learning communities in elementary schools.

Summary

The data collected from each school provided a wealth of information on the development of small learning communities. Educators in Moorhead had

asked "how" and "why" questions that required explanatory answers. As a result, the data offered the researcher further information that would provide direction in the development and implementation of small learning communities. Dr. Larry Nybladh encouraged and approved further analysis of the information (Appendix H and Appendix I). With the approval of the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board (Project Number IRB-200405-370), the researcher returned to the primary data collected through the internship and reviewed it as secondary data.

Chapter IV provides information on each of the schools with small learning communities examined in this study. Three themes emerged from the data. The contextual conditions and each theme are detailed.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to provide educators with information on the characteristics and practices of small learning communities in elementary schools. This chapter explores small learning communities through a multiple case study that examines three Minnesota elementary schools, each housing small learning communities.

Overview of Themes

A comparison of the three schools examined resulted in identification of themes common to each setting. Each theme explored characteristics that contribute to the development, growth, and sustainability of the small learning communities.

Theme I: Teacher Involvement and Commitment

Teacher involvement in the development and implementation of the instructional design as well as their level of commitment and dedication to the instructional approach.

Theme II: The Principal as an Instructional Design Leader

The role of the school principal in the development and implementation of the instructional design in each small learning community. The data identified

the principal's role in ensuring success, encouraging staff, and advocating for the program at the district and community level.

Theme III: The Instructional Design Creates a Learning Community

Each school's focus on students' social, emotional, and academic needs and how the small learning community facilitated those needs.

Careful analysis of these themes provided further understanding of the instructional design used to develop small learning communities.

Case Study I

Background Information

School A is located in a rural school district of over 1,700 students attending three schools which include one senior high school, one middle school of grades six through eight, and one elementary school of grades kindergarten through five. The district serves four townships. The district residents are represented by a six-member elected school board.

Student demographics for the 2003-2004 school year provide an overview of the district's population. The student population within the district consists of 819 (47.3%) females and 914 (52.7%) males. The ethnicity of the student population breaks down into the following categories: 1,648 (95.1%) White, non-Hispanic; 14 (.8%) American Indian/Alaskan Native; 30 (1.7%) Asian/Pacific Islander; 20 (1.1%) Black, non-Hispanic; and 21 (1.2%) Hispanic. Of the 1,733 students, 351 (20.2%) receive free or reduced school meals. The remaining 1,382 (79.7%) are not eligible for federal assistance for meals. There are 36 (2.0%) students in the district with limited English proficiency. The district's

special education program provides services for 229 (13.2%) students with 1,504 (86.7%) students receiving instruction through regular education. During the 2003-2004 year, the district experienced a mobility rate of 18% (Minnesota Department of Education, 2004).

The district mission statement states that the district is building a community of lifelong learners. The school superintendent writes that the school district supports the mission through quality services and lifelong learning opportunities, adding that helping each student be successful is at the heart of the district's mission.

During the 2003-2004 school year, the student demographics at School A were very similar to those of the district. There are 330 (47.8%) female students and 360 (52.2%) male students in grades kindergarten through six. The ethnicity of the students at School A divides into the following categories: 622 (90.1%) White, non-Hispanic; 2 (.3%) American Indian/Alaskan Native; 42 (6.1%) Asian/Pacific Islander; 9 (1.3%) Black, non-Hispanic; and 15 (2.2%) Hispanic. There are 41 (5.9%) who are limited in English proficiency; 37 (5.4%) students qualify for free or reduced meals. The special education program in School A provides services for 55 (8.0%) students. The school has a 96% attendance rate.

There are 32.9 teachers in School A with an average of 11 years of teaching experience. Of these individuals, 50% hold a bachelor's degree and 45.5% hold a master's degree. The average salary for teachers is $36,940.

There is one school administrator who holds a master's degree in education administration and has an annual salary of $79,212.

Other educators in the school include 1.3 student support services professionals, 1 library/media specialist, 6.5 paraprofessionals, and 9.3 individuals in other positions such as food services and plant maintenance.

In the area of academic achievement, students at School A demonstrate adequate yearly progress. MCA scores in 2003 at School A showed that 57.3% of third grade students scored in levels IIb, III, and IV in reading. In math, 62.6% of the third graders scored in levels IIb, III, and IV. Fifth grade students in 2003 at School A also completed the MCA tests. In reading, 73.1% of the fifth grade students scored in levels IIb, III, and IV. Writing scores are assessed in fifth grade, and 78.8% of the students scored in levels IIb, III, and IV. In mathematics, 74.2% of the fifth grade students scored in levels IIb, III, and IV.

School A is housed in a new building that is one year old. The new facility houses Community Education, Early Childhood Family Education, Early Childhood Special Education, and the Elementary Program. The facility is bright and spacious with common areas used primarily by the Elementary Program but available to the other programs as well. Each of these programs is housed in separate wings of the building. Literature provided by the school district refers to each as a school within a school.

The Elementary Program at School A provides an educational environment for students in kindergarten through grade eight. Students are in self-contained classrooms with a single teacher. The classrooms are clustered,

by grade level, in small learning communities. Each small learning community contains six classrooms that surround a commons area. The commons area consists of two small rooms that are used for small groups and a teacher planning room. Other smaller rooms are a part of the small learning community and are used by specialists for individual instruction.

Program Development

The educational program at School A is in a state of transition driven by the change in the school facility. The creation of small learning communities for School A is a new and different arrangement for the teaching staff. Teachers were accustomed to an older building with classrooms along long, straight hallways. They could choose to meet with other teachers or remain isolated in their own classroom. The new arrangement of classrooms has created an environment that allows teachers to collaborate with others who teach at the same grade level. It also creates isolation from other teachers who teach at different grade levels.

Teachers at School A have begun the process of collaboration. Collaboration has involved learning to use student test scores and daily work as data for determining curriculum evaluation and alignment. With the help of the assistant principal, they meet as grade level teams to map the curriculum for their grade. The process has been facilitated by morning meetings held once a month on a day when students have a delayed start to the school day. These meetings provided an opportunity for teachers to begin the collaboration process.

In many ways, the Elementary Program at School A is an evolving program. It is in the initial stages of development and change. Teachers are just beginning to examine student learning and look for ways to improve instruction to better meet student needs. Their focus is on the academic program.

Theme I: Teacher involvement and Commitment

Teachers at School A have a history of teaching in self-contained classrooms with limited interaction with each other. They have followed a traditional approach to instructional design and have seen little reason to change their educational delivery model. Their involvement with establishing an instructional method has been primarily within their own classrooms.

The new elementary school has provided an opportunity to begin the collaboration process. The physical design of the building changes their proximity to each other and facilitates opportunities for discussion. Teachers indicate that they like the new design but find they are making an adjustment to a different way of working together. They appreciate the ability to learn from each other but are slowly emerging from the isolation to which they were accustomed. Their personal instructional methods are observable by each other. Teachers find that being observed by other teachers is cumbersome and unusual.

The grouping by grade level has been appreciated by teachers as they find it facilitates their collaboration and discussion. They also find it allows for regrouping of students, allowing teachers to teach with different groups and organize their instruction. They indicate that the arrangements are "o.k." One

teacher explained that the principal liked it but found it to be "kind of lonely" because the principal was separated from the other grade levels.

Teachers indicate that the monthly meetings have been a good means of learning from each other. They have spent the time visiting and discussing problems that they have found to be difficult. One example has been the schedule of music, physical education, and art. They explained that they were dissatisfied with how the classes were arranged and spent time discussing that it should be changed.

Teachers used the monthly meetings to discuss state test scores and focus on math and reading instruction. They have begun to evaluate their curriculum and determine where to put greater instructional emphasis. As a result, they have adjusted the progression of the curriculum within the grade level. These discussions allow them to assess their current practices and determine where change needs to occur.

The teachers at School A have begun to change their instructional design by default. They have made changes because the school design has allowed greater interaction and collaboration. After one year, they are learning about the possibilities available to them and are beginning to explore new instructional approaches. Despite the changes that have been required of them, they are slowly responding by involving themselves in the possibilities available to them.

Theme II: The Principal as an Instructional Design Leader

School A has one principal and an assistant principal. They formed a balanced team with a combined focus on school management and instructional

improvement. They shared a dedication to the students of School A and derive energy from direct involvement with them. They express appreciation for the teaching staff and recognize that moving to a new school with a unique arrangement has been taxing. Working with teachers through the change process has forced them to spend substantial time on adult issues more than instructional design.

The principal of School A has been with the district for over 20 years. He/she served as principal at the original elementary school and displayed pride in the new facility. The principal concentrated his or her efforts on the management of the school and handled the daily issues as they arose. He or she was enthusiastic about being a principal and provided a foundation to the school community. The principal's leadership style was that of a school manager involved at all levels of the school's management. He or she could be found working in the cafeteria and, later in the day, outside repairing playground equipment. The principal has turned many of the curriculum issues and scheduling over to the assistant principal.

The change to the new building has been difficult for the principal. He or she explained that the principal understood the former building and its culture. The principal stated, "I miss the old building and the cramped conditions." He or she explained that the building facilitated problem solving because teachers were closer together and not spread out as they are in the new building. The principal found that problem solving has become complex and was frustrated by that.

Supporting the teaching staff was significant to the principal. The principal spoke of their achievements and their ability to make the move to the new building. At the same time, he or she spoke with agitation about their complaints. The principal explained that they are not risk-takers and are unwilling to accept the current conditions and situations without complaint. The principal believed that they are good teachers but would like to see them solve problems independently.

The assistant principal is a teacher on special assignment in the process of completing his or her education administration specialist degree. While the assistant principal also is busy with the daily activities at the school, his or her focus has been the instructional program and curriculum. He or she has begun the process of working with teachers so that they are able to use collaboration to improve instruction. The assistant principal has provided teachers with staff development training so that they can use test score data to ascertain students' level of success and their areas of need. Through his or her efforts, the monthly meetings have become focused on student achievement and the development of academic success.

The assistant principal explains the implications the school faces if students are unable to demonstrate adequate yearly progress. The assistant principal notes that test scores need to be raised, especially for third graders, and identifies the area of reading as needing to be examined. The assistant principal noted with some frustration that teachers are not fully aware of the implications of low test scores and that they are quick to indicate that the

students have problems, not the instructional process. On the other hand, the principal expresses satisfaction with the work teachers have done. The principal explained that curriculum alignment within grade level had been successful. It is his or her goal to bring teachers together into cross grade discussions that will lead to a formal, professional learning community. The principal recognizes the potential the new building provides for development of alternative instructional design but noted that it will take time for teachers to change their instructional practices.

Theme III: The Instructional Design Creates a Learning Community

School A is in a change cycle resulting from the move to a new school building that has altered the school's culture. The culture is in a state of transformation due to the physical small learning communities that have been constructed in the new building. This physical change has forced teachers out of their classrooms into a collaborative setting that eliminates the isolation available in an older building. Changing demands on student achievement and instructional accountability contributes to a cultural change, placing new demands on teachers and their instructional model.

Community in School A is evolving. The monthly meetings and the change in proximity to each other's classrooms have created a different kind of professional community. Staff members have an amiable relationship with each other that has transferred from their former school. This relationship is now moving toward a professional relationship that holds the potential for improving

instruction and student achievement. These are adult issues that are affecting the development of small learning communities.

The educators at School A demonstrate an enthusiasm for education and a dedication to the students they work with. The small learning communities have allowed teachers within the same grade levels to create learning opportunities for students that give them opportunities to meet each other and work together.

The primary source of community is in each classroom. The teacher creates an environment that nurtures the students' social and emotional needs as well as their academic needs. Whether teachers consciously or unconsciously work to develop the classroom community, it exists. The classroom community gives students a sense of place within the school. This community exists for students the one year they are with a teacher.

The transition to small learning communities is in the initial stages of development in School A. Educators are just beginning to put their unique building to work for them.

Summary

The educators in School A have opened a new building designed for small learning communities. After being in the new building for one year, they are beginning to learn how to collaborate with the group of teachers in each small learning community. They are slowly evolving toward an adult, professional learning community that allows them to examine student progress and adjust curriculum in order to meet students' academic needs.

The school principal provides the teaching staff with support and encouragement. The principal's focus is the management of the school and the handling of daily activities. The assistant principal works with curriculum and instructional design. Through the assistant principal's assistance, teachers are learning how to collaborate and use student data to make educational decisions about instruction.

The new building that houses School A provides teachers with an environment that encourages sharing and discourages isolation. Classrooms are clustered into a physical, small learning community. This design offers them the opportunity to fully establish a learning community that meets students' social and emotional needs as well as their academic needs.

The State of Minnesota testing results and the state level report card show that students in School A are making adequate yearly progress. School A is ranked as a three star school in reading and math.

Case Study II

Background Information

School B is located in a suburban school district of over 7,000 students attending nine schools which include one senior high school, two middle schools of grades six through nine, and six elementary schools of grades kindergarten through five. The district serves a single residential community represented by a seven-member elected school board.

Student demographics for the 2003-2004 school year provide an overview of the district's population. The student population within the district consists of

3,590 (49.7%) females and 3,624 (50.2%) males. The ethnicity of the student population breaks down into the following categories: 6,464 (89.6%) White, non-Hispanic; 18 (.2%) American Indian/Alaskan Native; 345 (4.7%) Asian/Pacific Islander; 263 (3.6%) Black, non-Hispanic; and 124 (1.7%) Hispanic. Of the 7,214 students, 414 (5.7%) receive free or reduced school meals. The remaining 6,800 (94.2%) are not eligible for federal assistance for meals. There are 166 (2.3%) students in the district with limited English proficiency. The district's special education program provides services for 670 (9.9%) students with 6,544 (90.7%) students receiving instruction through their regular education. During the 2003-2004 year, the district experienced a mobility rate of 6% (Minnesota Department of Education, 2004).

The district mission statement states that educators create partnerships with students' families and the community, so students become responsible, lifelong learners. The mission statement goes on to say that students will possess academic skills, knowledge, creativity, a sense of self-worth, and values.

During the 2003-2004 school year, the student demographics at School B were very similar to those of the district. There are 330 (47.8%) female students and 360 (52.1%) male students in grades kindergarten through six. The ethnicity of the students at School B divides into the following categories: 461 (92.0%) White, non-Hispanic; 3 (.6%) American Indian/Alaskan Native; 19 (3.7%) Asian/Pacific Islander; 13 (2.5%) Black, non-Hispanic; and 5 (1.0%) Hispanic. There are 6 (1.2%) who are limited in English proficiency; 19 (3.7%) students qualify for free or reduced meals. The special education program in School B

provides services for 44 (8.7%) students. The school has a 96% attendance rate.

There are 27.6 teachers in School B with an average of 8 years of teaching experience. Of these individuals, 32.7% possess a bachelor's degree and 58.9% possess a master's degree. The average salary for teachers is $42,527. There is one school administrator who possesses a master's degree in education administration and has an annual salary of $89,582.

Other educators in the school include 2.5 student support services professionals, 1 library/media specialist, 15.9 paraprofessionals, and 13.2 individuals in other positions such as food services and plant maintenance.

In the area of academic achievement, students at School B demonstrate adequate yearly progress. MCA scores in 2003 at School B showed that 86.0% of third grade students scored in levels IIb, III, and IV in reading. In math, 81.6% of the third graders scored in levels IIb, III, and IV. Fifth grade students in 2003 at School B also completed the MCA tests. In reading, 91.9% of the fifth grade students scored in levels IIb, III, and IV. Writing scores are assessed in fifth grade, and 86.9% of the students scored in levels IIb, III, and IV. In mathematics, 88.6% of the fifth grade students scored in levels IIb, III, and IV.

School B is housed in a neighborhood school built in 1956 with a capacity for 550 students. The building has had two additions added since it was originally constructed. In the 1980s, the school was closed due to decreased enrollment in the school district. A portion of the building was reopened in 1982 to house one of the small learning communities that continues to operate in the

building. The school has been maintained, is brightly lit, and colorful. The original lockers are still used, giving the building a dated look.

There are two small learning communities in School B for students in grades one through five. Each is a unique program with varying instructional practices. The two small learning communities share the common facilities of the gym, music rooms, and art rooms. All students participate in art, music, physical education, and Spanish language instruction. The school rules are the same for all students and are supported by the teachers in both programs. There is one principal at School B who serves as the administrator for both small learning communities.

The physical setting for each program is similar as well. School B has individual, self-contained classrooms. The rooms are located on both sides of long, straight hallways. Although the two distinct small learning communities are housed on different sides of the school, there is no physical boundary that divides the two from each other. Visitors are only able to distinguish between the two small learning communities by the names of the teachers outside each classroom door.

Kindergarten forms a third small learning community in School B. Kindergartners attend a half day program in self-contained classes. The instructional program focuses on social interaction and reading and writing readiness. At the end of kindergarten, parents are invited to select one of the two small learning communities for their child.

Program Development

The first small learning community to be developed at School B was Program I, continuous progress program. The program has developed over the past 20 years into a districtwide alternative program drawing students from across the school district. Program I is a multiage and multi-grade program where students are placed in classroom families and remain there for all of their elementary years. Two classrooms form a small learning community. There is a teacher in each room who partners with the teacher in a corresponding classroom next door.

Each classroom contains children in three grade levels. Initially, students start in one classroom for first, second, and third grade. The second, corresponding classroom contains third, fourth, and fifth graders. Students in third grade are moved between the two classrooms based on their needs and development. Students, although aware of the grade level they are in, work together in multiage groupings. The two classrooms come together daily to form a complete small learning community. They remain in the multiage setting for all instruction that is built upon a five-year curriculum cycle.

The teachers in Program I work as partners. One teacher is the homeroom teacher for students in first, second, and third grade. The second teacher is with the third, fourth, and fifth graders. The partnership allows teachers to team teach and move back and forth between each other's classroom. The teaching partners plan together and cross over to teach in each other's classroom. This allows students to work with both teachers at all grade

levels. In doing so, a five-year relationship is developed between students and teachers.

Within Program I, a student and teacher relationship is nurtured and developed. Students remain with the same two teachers through all their elementary years. This results in a sustained relationship that allows the teacher to know the student's academic, social, and emotional needs. The teacher also creates a sustained relationship with the student's parents that allows for ongoing communications and a close relationship with greater depth that grows over time. A familiarity is developed between teacher, student, and parents that is warm, friendly, and open. Students talk with their teachers on a first name basis, eliminating teacher titles. This contributes to an intimate, family approach to developing a mutual relationship of trust and friendship.

Program II is the second small learning community within School B. This program is a looping program intended to create a learning environment that creates a bond between teacher and students. While Program II appears to be traditional, it implements many of the multi-graded concepts practiced in Program I. Overall, a philosophy of addressing all areas of a student's development prevails. A small learning community focus is endorsed as a means to provide students with a learning environment where they find acceptance and ownership.

In Program II, students are assigned to single grade level classes. The students and teachers loop in first and second grade, remaining together for a two-year period. The students are reorganized into new class groupings after second grade. They then loop again in third and fourth grade. Class

reorganization occurs again at fifth grade. Fifth graders are included in Program II but do not loop as they move to the middle schools for sixth grade.

Teachers in Program II work as partners. While the partnership has been established to facilitate the grade level looping, it also enables teachers to work together as a team. They plan cross grade activities and, once a week, work on a character education curriculum in multi-graded groups. Teachers meet once a week to plan instruction and review student progress.

Program II maintains a number of elements traditional to elementary schools that are not practiced in Program I. The classrooms are self-contained settings and, despite multiage or cross graded activities, the greatest amount of instruction occurs within the single grade classroom. A standards-based, grade specific curriculum is followed. Students address teachers by their formal titles.

In this school district, parents are offered three choices from which to select an educational practice for their children. When students enroll in kindergarten, parents receive literature mailed to them from the school district stating all the educational options available in the district. Options include attending Program I, located at School B, as well as one other building, a World Language Immersion Program, or the neighborhood school close to their home. Most district families choose the school closest to their homes. As a result, while School B has a number of students who are attending because of parent choice, an even larger number attend the school because it is close to their home. As a result, School B parents are still able to choose between the two programs when their child completes kindergarten. Once they make a choice, they stay with the

program for the duration of their child's elementary years. If they find they are dissatisfied with one program, they are allowed to move to the other. Educators at School B indicate that this transfer is rare, occurring only once or twice during a year, but not viewed as a problem when it does. It is not uncommon for parents to separate their children by placing one in Program I and another in Program II.

Program I and Program II coexist in School B in an environment of cooperation and mutual respect for 14 years. During this time, a number of adjustments and changes have occurred to enhance each program. Despite changes and transitions, the integrity of each program is maintained and not sacrificed.

Theme I: Teacher Involvement and Commitment

Program I and Program II developed as a result of teacher initiatives to develop alternative approaches to instruction that are student centered. While each program is unique, the level of teacher involvement and commitment in each is the single, most contributing factor towards success. Within this theme, common practices have been used to ensure collaboration, curriculum consistency, budget management, and student success.

When interviewed, teachers stated that the core factor that ensures the success of each program is a common educational philosophy shared by all educators within the programs. Teachers explained that anyone wanting to teach in these programs "must be passionate" about the instructional practices

and beliefs about student learning. They pointed out that after 14 years, the programs' philosophy has remained unchanged.

A veteran teacher, who helped develop Program II, explained that to create these types of programs, teachers "must come in with ideas that will ebb and flow" and an ability to adjust to change. The teacher further explained, "You must be able to give yourself permission to go with something different."

Teamwork, teachers explained, has been essential to the development of the programs. As a result, teachers have been highly involved in the hiring of new staff members. They state that hiring must be done "purposefully" and that they "hand pick" new team members. The principal is involved in the process, but the teachers make the final selection.

The instructional design of each program requires teachers to be collaborative, open to new ideas, and willing to share. The programs require teachers to work as groups of two or teaching partners. Teaching partners must be "equally strong" individuals. In a good partnership, the teachers "teach like they are a mirror," reflecting each other's practices. "It is as though one teacher is split down the middle," one teacher explained.

Team members must also be willing to ask for help. A teacher explained that everyone must be "willing to go ask for help" and to "reach out to others in the team." Collaboration has been an essential component for each program. Teachers establish a meeting time once a week to work together discussing instructional plans and student progress. These meetings occur during their personal time.

With two distinct programs in School B, competition and professional envy have created problems. The teachers and the principal recognized a need for increased understanding about each program and to create a respectful environment. As a result, teachers have been deliberate about learning about each other's program. They are careful not to criticize the programs. They also discourage parents from comparing the two programs and state that each is equally strong.

Teachers indicated that the current staff no longer focuses on envy or partakes in competition with each other. One teacher stated, "We are competitive in a good way. You can't be satisfied with the same old, same old. You have to be willing to work very hard and try new ideas."

The development and implementation of the two programs has required substantial planning time. Teachers have found that they often need to meet after the students' instructional day and long past their contracted day. Each program staff team meets at least once a week. Teachers explained that there are some weeks, especially at the beginning of the year, when they will put in 50 to 60 hours. One teacher elaborated by saying that teachers "balance in totality" the amount of time that is required to make the programs a success. The teacher further explained that some weeks require more time; but, since teachers have summers off, the longer hours are acceptable. When discussing the summer, the teacher added, "Nobody gets time off like that."

Teachers expressed commitment and enthusiasm for the two programs that form the small learning communities in School B. They recognize the

limitations of the programs and problems they have encountered. They are committed to putting in extra hours in order to ensure student success in each program. A teacher explained, "It doesn't matter if it's more work or not; it's what's good for kids." Another added, "You have to want to work here; it's not just a job."

Theme II: The Principal as an Instructional Design Leader

The principal at School B started as a teacher in Program I. The principal's background as a teacher and experience with the program provided the principal with a comprehensive background for becoming the principal. The principal expressed enthusiasm and dedication to the programs. The principal has found that, as principal, it is essential to maintain the integrity of the programs as well as ensure that instruction enables students to meet state academic standards. The principal defined the position as being one where the principal needs to encourage parents and teachers to work together and ensuring that the best educational practices are being employed. The principal has been principal at School B for three years.

The first challenge that the principal encountered at School B was the internal conflict that was developing between Program I and Program II as a result of professional envy and competition. Through direct communication and interactions with teachers, the principal found that there was little understanding of the programs by staff members. Staff members expressed concerns over equal treatment of both programs and the distribution of resources and finances. The principal determined that it was essential to teach teachers about each

other's programs, address questions that teachers had, and to create open communications. The two programs were disconnecting from each other, resulting in the need to bring staff together as a full school team.

The principal found that the best approach was to have all members of the teaching staff come together for one meeting to address questions and concerns. The principal had the staff sit in a large circle and explained that this was the one chance they had to ask each other about the programs and to learn about the expenditures and practices. Staff members were asked to use respect and empathy. The principal served as a moderator and facilitator. As a result, many questions were presented and answered. Teachers learned about each program's philosophy and practices. The principal answered all questions regarding finances and resources.

The meeting served as a starting point for increased staff communications and understanding. The principal took the next step to begin team building through staff development and focusing on student learning issues. Over the past two years, staff members have taken a weekend retreat outside of the school district. Staff members use the retreat to plan and develop their programs and work on instructional issues. The weekend retreat also allows for staff members to get to know each other better and enjoy each other's company and friendship. The principal feels that the weekend retreat has opened communications and encouraged collaboration between the programs. As a result, the principal believes that staff members have "passed beyond envy and competition."

Establishing trust between the programs with the principal's leadership has been important. At this point, the principal finds that, as rumors surface, he or she must insist on staff members talking through their concerns and facing each issue. The principal stated, "I tell teachers, 'let's talk about it.'" It is through communication that the staff is able to understand the programs and support each other's efforts. Through the use of building leadership teams and a building budget committee, communication is encouraged and facilitated.

The principal serves as monitor, evaluator, and advocate for Program I and Program II. In this role, he or she maintains the integrity of the programs by keeping each program's philosophy intact. He or she ensures that the instructional practices are sustained and that new, promising practices are explored. To do so, the principal communicates frequently with teachers about their programs, practices, and student success. The principal attends their program meetings, discusses proposed changes, and monitors implementation of new practices.

An important aspect of the principal's role of monitor is to preserve an instructional focus on student achievement, free of adult issues. A means for doing this is hiring individuals who share the same philosophy of the teachers in the program and want to teach in the unique settings found in each program. When hiring, the principal serves as facilitator, empowering teachers to take the lead in selecting individuals who will be fit into each program as a team member. The principal firmly believes, as the teachers have stated, that an individual must want to work in the programs and has to recognize the level of work involved in

ensuring the programs' success. The principal concludes, "You have to be willing to put forth the effort; it takes the right people."

The role of advocate and monitor also requires the principal to manage funding and resources equitably between the programs. This requires the principal to recognize and communicate to the staff that equal and fair are not always synonymous. The principal finds that balancing program needs, student needs, and teacher requests is essential when making funding decisions.

The principal manages the public relations that are essential to promoting Program I and Program II. The principal tells parents that the school offers "two great choices" and that "you can't make a bad choice." In order to be an effective communicator, the principal must remain knowledgeable of the activities and practices of each program. The principal meets with parents frequently through formal meetings and at parents' requests. An important public relations challenge the principal faces is the presence of three renown private schools located in the district. Program I and Program II offer parents choices and options that best meet their children's needs and provide the school district a competitive edge when attempting to attract and maintain student enrollment. Promoting the two programs is important and necessary.

An essential part of the principal's role is to monitor educational effectiveness of Program I and Program II. A review of state test scores for School B indicates that students are making substantial gains and demonstrating achievement. The principal explained that these scores are a poor indicator of the school's success because of the advantages the students bring to school.

The principal explained that the programs, especially Program I, attract families in which the parents are highly educated, set high expectations for their children, and demand more of the public schools. The principal also explains that the students come from affluent homes and have many opportunities outside of the school for learning experiences.

In order to determine the effectiveness of the programs, the principal evaluates student and parent satisfaction of the programs. The principal needs to be sure that students have received a broadening of their cognitive skills and have benefited from the relationships they form with the teachers. To do so, the principal has surveyed former students at the middle schools and high school. Surveys have also been done of the teachers who work with the students when they leave the programs. The parents have also been surveyed and invited to discuss their children's experiences in the programs.

The results of the surveys have been positive. Students report that they enjoyed their experiences and felt comfortable moving into new educational environments with different teachers. They are able to make new friends and are comfortable with the adults in the new settings. They continue to demonstrate academic growth. Teachers report that the students have a strong background and appear to adapt to the new educational environment. Parents have reported that they enjoyed the relationships that developed when their children were in Program I and Program II and found they could be an active part of their child's education.

These results are important to the principal. The principal believes that building relationships and making academic progress form the basis for a strong education. The principal states,

> Education is a journey. As educators and parents, it is our job to learn about educational programs and determine the programs that will benefit our children. Creating a learning environment requires the proper blend of essential programs that will produce the desired result.

Program I and Program II are effective if all aspects of a student's education are being addressed and met.

Theme III: The Instructional Design Creates a Learning Community

The small learning communities formed by Program I and Program II are focused on creating a learning environment that is student centered and meets the learning styles of each student. The principal and teachers believe that they are responsible for education that promotes academic growth but also social and emotional growth. This is reflected in School B's belief statement that states that everyone has a right to learn, to have fun, and to belong.

The educators at School B recognize that they use varied approaches to educate students but describe their shared philosophical beliefs in a description of the learning environment:

- cooperative learning: In cooperative learning groups, students work together to achieve social and academic goals. Structured cooperative groups enhance learning, increase motivation to achieve, encourage positive social relationships, and improve psychological health.

- choice theory and the five basic needs: People have five basic needs that include love and belonging, fun, freedom, success, and survival. An understanding of these basic needs results in positive choices and better understanding of the behavior of others.
- Life skills: Life skills are dispositions, attitudes, or habits that will enhance students' success, academically and socially, throughout life. Life skills guide behavior as students learn and interact.
- Conflict resolution: Since conflict is a natural part of life, it is necessary that students learn how to interact effectively and peacefully with each other. Therefore, students learn a step-by-step process to help solve interpersonal conflicts.

These beliefs form the basis for the instructional design in Program I and Program II. They provide a balance between academics and social and emotional growth that provides the base for building a learning community. Each program develops a sense of belonging and community that is unique to the program. There is also a sense of schoolwide community that is developed.

In Program I, community develops over five years. Students enter the program as first graders and remain with the same two teachers and classmates through the fifth grade. As a result, teachers make a connection with the student and his or her family that creates an encouraging, familiar support system that is sustained throughout the student's elementary years. Students are well known by the teachers who are able to learn the students' academic needs as well as social and emotional needs. In this setting, students are not missed or allowed to

slip through the cracks. Instead, a relationship is built year after year that allows the teacher to know each student. Often, siblings are together in the same room or school family, enabling a closer relationship to form between the teacher and parent. In a few instances, a teacher and family have stayed together for up to 10 years.

The teachers in the program take deliberate steps to create a welcoming learning environment. Within the program, Family Time is held daily for all the students in one family. This brings together students in first through fifth grade. The bringing together of the younger and older students allows for students to learn from each other. During this time, students discuss current news, projects, and learn to use peer mediation. The teachers and principal agreed that these family times create positive relationships between the older and younger students, the impact of which can be seen on the playground. The students communicate with each other and conflict is limited.

In Program II, community building begins in the classroom. Teachers develop community with their students through looping their class over a two-year period. In doing so, a teacher creates a close bond with each student through which a student's individual needs are identified and addressed. Teachers and parents are able to create a connection that is supportive of the educational process.

The teachers in Program II meet weekly on Wednesday mornings prior to the start of the school day. These meetings are collaborative sessions that allow teachers to discuss student needs, plan projects, and discuss curriculum. Since

the teachers work as a team, information about students is shared and their needs discussed.

Program II also sets aside time each week to bring all the students in grades one through five together. During these meetings, students work together in cross grade level groups on social skills and peer mediation. These meetings allow students to get to know each other, learn together, and from each other. They contribute to creating a community within the program that increases interaction with other teachers and students.

With the presence of two distinctively unique programs, as well as the kindergarten program, building a schoolwide community takes time and attention. To create the schoolwide community, educators and parents have come together to focus attention on the school's attributes that are common to all the programs. Attention has been given to developing school spirit through activities and student opportunities. All students have a number of schoolwide activities open to them, such as chess club, school patrol, student council, band and orchestra, an environmental club, and Math Olympiads.

The principal has nurtured schoolwide community. He or she has worked hard to eliminate any comparisons of the programs, focusing instead on the educational programming of each. In the principal's communications with parents, such as the school newsletter, he or she addresses the information in a schoolwide format. He or she has developed a Site Council, made up of parents, staff, and community members. The Site Council is a policy-making and review council for the school, though not directly involved in the school's day-to-day

operations. Through these and other activities, he or she has balanced each program's identity with the whole school's identity.

Parents have a number of opportunities to become involved without regard for their child's program. The Parent Teacher Association has been involved in promoting the whole school through activities that benefit children, such as fund raising, a school carnival, book fair, and Breakfast Breaks. There is also a Parent Communication Network (PCN), an organization with a stated mission to serve the community by providing forums that address parent education and topics of interest specific to personal, social, and transitional development in students in kindergarten through grade 12.

An important factor when examining School B's schoolwide community is that the school belief statement and philosophical beliefs are specific to the school, not a single program. These statements address the overall learning community and the focus of the educational program for all students. They are constants that bring the school together as one whole community with small learning communities.

Summary

School B houses three small learning communities: the Kindergarten Program, Program I, and Program II. Program I and Program II have unique instructional designs that address students' academic, social, and emotional needs through teacher and student relationships that develop over two or more years. Teachers have developed the programs and are committed to the programs. Despite the extra time the programs require, teachers are dedicated

to the programs' success. Teachers find it takes motivated, passionate individuals to work in the programs.

At School B, the principal's role is to be supportive of the programs and, at the same time, maintain a schoolwide sense of community. The principal balances the programs, making sure that conflict between the programs is handled in a direct manner through communication with the parties involved. An important part of the principal's job is to promote Program I and Program II. This requires the principal to be knowledgeable about all aspects of the programs.

Program I and Program II offer students opportunities to be a part of the learning community. Students in both programs are involved in a looping model that allows students to remain with the same teachers for two or more years. As a result, students are well known by their teachers and develop relationships with them that support their academic, social, and emotional growth. Students are also a part of a schoolwide community. There are a number of activities for students and their parents that allow them to be a part of the school as well as the program they attend.

The State of Minnesota State testing results and the state level report card for School B show that students are making adequate yearly progress. The school is ranked as a four star school in math and a five star school in reading.

Case Study III

Background Information

School C is located in a suburban school district of over 11,000 students attending 23 schools that include one senior high school, three junior high

schools, and 10 elementary schools. The district encompasses three separate communities represented by a seven-member elected school board.

Student demographics for the 2003-2004 school year provide an overview of the district's population. The student population within the district consists of 5,336 (48.3%) females and 5,701 (51.6%) males. The ethnicity of the student population breaks down into the following categories: 8,395 (76.0%) White, non-Hispanic; 67 (.6%) American Indian/Alaskan Native; 839 (7.6%) Asian/Pacific Islander; 1,264 (11.4%) Black, non-Hispanic; and 472 (4.2%) Hispanic. Of the 11,037 students, 1,933 (17.5%) receive free or reduced school meals. The remaining 9,104 (82.4%) are not eligible for federal assistance for meals. There are 913 (8.2%) students in the district with limited English proficiency. The district's special education program provides services for 1,249 (11.3%) students with 9,788 (88.6%) students receiving instruction through their regular education. During the 2003-2004 year, the district experienced a mobility rate of 14.5% (Minnesota Department of Education, 2004).

The district mission statement states that, through a partnership between educators, parents, and community, students will be provided with a relevant and challenging learning experience. A set of district beliefs describes a commitment to students as individuals and to meeting their unique educational needs. The district beliefs also recognize the role of the family and community in offering quality educational experiences.

School C opened in September 1996 and has a student capacity of 750 and currently houses 690 students. During the 2003-2004 school year, the

student demographics were very similar to those of the district. There are 355 (47.1%) female students and 399 (52.9%) male students in grades kindergarten through five. The ethnicity of the students at School C divides into the following categories: 720 (95.5%) White, non-Hispanic; 4 (.5%) American Indian/Alaskan Native; 14 (1.9%) Asian/Pacific Islander; 8 (1.1%) Black, non-Hispanic; and 8 (1.1%) Hispanic. There are 15 (2.0%) who are limited in English proficiency; 182 (24.1%) students qualify for free or reduced meals. The special education program in School C provides services for 88 (11.7%) students. The school has a 96% attendance rate.

There are 36.5 teachers in School C with an average of 12 years of teaching experience. Of these individuals, 37.5% possess a bachelor's degree and 56.2% possess a master's degree. The average salary for teachers is $45,028. There is one school administrator who possesses a doctorate in education administration and has an annual salary of $83,832.

Other educators in the school include 1 student support services professional, 1 library/media specialist, 7.1 paraprofessionals, and 11.6 individuals in other positions such as food services and plant maintenance.

In the area of academic achievement, students at School C demonstrate adequate yearly progress. MCA scores in 2003 at School C showed that 69% of third grade students scored in levels IIb, III, and IV in reading. In math, 72.3% of the third graders scored in levels IIb, III, and IV. Fifth grade students in 2003 at School C also completed the MCA tests. In reading, 87.5% of the fifth grade students scored in levels IIb, III, and IV. Writing scores are assessed in fifth

grade, and 76% of the students scored in levels IIb, III, and IV. In mathematics, 82.1% of the fifth grade students scored in levels IIb, III, and IV.

School C is housed in an eight-year-old, two-story facility located on the western edge of the school district. It is on a parcel of land that includes natural wetlands. There are six small learning communities within the building. These small learning communities are clusters of classrooms built around a shared learning area that includes a computer lab of 12 computers. The building was intentionally designed to enhance instructional delivery through flexibility and collaboration.

Each classroom is a self-contained room with three and a half walls and a wide entrance into the shared learning area. The classrooms are furnished with student desks or tables. Each classroom houses a single grade level. A combination of grades are together in the small learning community. There is a kindergarten small learning community where students attend school all day, every day. There are three first grade through fourth grade (grades 1, 2, 3, 4) small learning communities, a third grade through sixth grade (grades 3, 4, 5, 6) small learning community, and a fourth grade through sixth grade (grades 4, 5, 6) small learning community.

Within each small learning community, teachers work as a team sharing the collective space. There is an emphasis on collaboration between members of each learning community, teachers and students alike. Students within the small learning communities work together on small learning community projects

and multi-grade level instruction. Within the small learning community, a looping model is implemented where students remain with their teachers for two years.

Program Development

The development of School C was the result of collaborative planning. The principal of School C explains that planning for the unique program began before the school was designed and built. The principal explains that when district officials made the decision to build a new school it was based on the growing student population in the district. As planning began, the school board directed school district officials to develop a new school with a unique instructional design, offering an alternative delivery system different from other schools in the district. The school board did not specify a specific instructional approach. Instead, they directed officials to encourage teachers to develop the instructional design.

To begin the program development process, school officials visited other schools in the United States. Schools with unique architectural designs built to accommodate a specific instructional design were selected. Research was done to ascertain the success of each program and to determine whether the program could be duplicated in their community. Using this information, an architectural design was developed and building began.

During the 1994-1995 school year, the principal was selected for the new building. His or her role became that of organizer and instructional design leader. One of the first tasks was to select a Teacher Planning Team. The Teacher Planning Team was an eight-member group of teachers and the

principal who met together to create a new educational plan for the new school. The Teacher Planning Team consisted of individuals who expressed interest in moving to the new building and teaching with a different instructional design. Teachers from across the district were invited to indicate their interest and apply. Seven teachers were selected by the principal, forming the Teacher Planning Team. They began working in June 1995, meeting throughout the summer and the 1995-1996 school year. A detailed timeline was developed and followed closely by the Teacher Planning Team.

The Teacher Planning Team knew they were to create a unique instructional program. They began by developing a mission statement for the school and a list of beliefs. When interviewed, a member of the planning team stated that this took a lot of time, both personal and professional time. The principal indicated that this was time well spent, as mission and beliefs help set the direction of the planning and guided the choice of educational models. An extensive amount of research was conducted by the Teacher Planning Team. The members of the Teacher Planning Team dialogued with each other about their findings on small learning communities, looping, multiage classes, and multi-grade classes. As a result of their findings, the Teacher Planning Team selected an instructional model that allowed students to develop close working relationships with teachers over a sustained period of time, allowed for multiage instruction and organization, and focused on the whole child.

Planning continued throughout the entire 1995-1996 school year. Another 14 teachers joined the members of the Teacher Planning Team later in the year,

thus forming the new staff. Teachers were again invited to apply to transfer to the new school. A lot of interest was expressed in the instructional design, but not everyone who expressed a desire to join the team was accepted. The principal indicated that teachers who were accepted were chosen because they were "philosophically on the same page" as the members of the planning team.

When the school opened in September 1996, teachers embarked on an instructional design that was a multiage program within a cross graded setting. The building design allowed for students to be placed in a small learning community where they worked with a core group of teachers over a period of five years. Instruction was to be seamless, or without interruption, and students were to continually move at their own pace.

In the first two years of the program, teachers found that the instructional design required extensive planning time and work. The principal explains that often teachers were at school until 7:00 p.m. each night planning students' programs and organizing instructional delivery. Teachers from the Teacher Planning Team explained that the heavy work load created by the multiage configuration was too difficult and time consuming. Teachers became frustrated and disillusioned about the approach.

Teachers at School C also found that they were scrutinized by other teachers in the district. Teacher Planning Team members indicated that professional criticism became intense and others appeared to be "looking to see us fail." Team members worked hard to squelch rumors but eventually gave up.

There was a lot of misunderstanding by other educators in the district as well as professional envy.

As the program matured, a number of changes were initiated. The instructional design moved from a multiage program to a looping program in multi-graded small learning communities. Students have opportunities to interact with other students in different grade levels within the small learning community, but classrooms house only one grade level. The looping model allows for students to connect with teachers over an extended period of time that allows uninterrupted instruction. The multi-graded communities allow students to be within a small setting despite the overall size of the school.

School C teachers report that the cross graded, small learning community approach is working well and is very valuable for students. Strong student and staff relationships develop and have an opportunity to be nurtured. The small learning community offers a safe and comfortable environment.

The classes in the small learning communities gather in one large group, daily, to start the day. Using the shared learning area in the center of the cluster, they are able to meet and work together. The small learning communities eat lunch and recess together. They also take fieldtrips together. Teachers indicate that the multi-graded small learning communities are valuable, as students have opportunities to learn from each other. Older students model appropriate behavior for younger students. The teacher explained that the sixth graders are "mellower" around the younger students. Despite their pride at being the oldest in the school, they are more responsible and less arrogant.

The looping model serves as an alternative to the originally proposed multiage model. The principal indicated that building educators would like to continue the multiage program but found it to be too difficult to maintain the small learning communities, continue the extensive planning the model required; and create a schoolwide schedule for instruction in music, art, and physical education. Instead, the looping offers an alternative approach that encourages a strong connection between students and teachers. The looping model offers an approach that ensures increased instructional time because teachers know their students and their needs.

Now in the school's eighth year, the principal and the Teacher Planning Team expressed satisfaction with the program. They indicated that staff members are committed to the program. While some concern is expressed that the changes in staff have resulted in a younger, inexperienced staff, those who are at School C are committed and recognize the value of the program.

Theme I: Teacher Involvement and Commitment

When asked about the success of the instructional program in School C, the teachers and principal indicated that a high level of teacher involvement and commitment is critical to the development of the program. Teachers' involvement began with the conception of the program and was essential to implementation.

The teachers serving on the Teacher Planning Team spoke openly about their involvement with the development of School C. They explained that those who served on the team had a high interest in the development of the program and were willing to put in an exceptional amount of time to design the new

school. The teachers identified each other as flexible thinkers who saw the chance to work on the program as an optimum, professional opportunity. They explained that they had a lot of fun throughout the planning process. They enjoyed each other and had a good time working together.

An aspect of the planning process that they expressed satisfaction about was that they felt that they were heard. When they presented ideas or concepts, their ideas were discussed and contemplated. The only time they strayed from this belief was in regards to the architect. As one teacher stated, "Every architect should sub for a day." The teacher's point being that the architect was not always open to their ideas.

The Teacher Planning Team members noted that at times their involvement was difficult due to the scrutiny by other teachers. Teachers employed in other schools in the district made negative comments about the members on the Teacher Planning Team. Teacher Planning Team members reported that they considered these comments as indicators of professional envy. As one teacher explained, "We usually blew it off, but some of the comments stung." They also found themselves becoming defensive and would attempt to dispel rumors. Eventually, they gave up because there were too many misunderstandings.

The Teacher Planning Team members expressed satisfaction with their role in the development of the program. The four members interviewed expressed confidence in the work they had accomplished. Although they noted that not everything had gone as planned, the program continued to develop and

grow. They stated that they would not hesitate to become involved in the planning process again. The experience had been invigorating and powerful.

The principal explained that teacher involvement contributed to the success of the program. The principal noted that the teachers were exceptional. The principal was proud of the work that they accomplished. Often, the principal would be involved in administrative activities involving the development of the school and could rely on the Teacher Planning Team to continue the development of the instructional design. The principal noted that all the members of the Teacher Planning Team worked as leaders. This approach to shared leadership contributed to the successful development of the program.

Teacher involvement and commitment continue to be part of the instructional program and leadership at School C. Committees work on a variety of areas that contribute to the school's management as well as the educational program. A Staff Council meets monthly to discuss issues facing the school. Teachers meet once a week in their communities to collaborate on students and planning for their community. The teachers interviewed explained that to work at School C takes dedication to the instructional design of the program as well as a commitment to work in a collegial team. They explained that there is not room for competition amongst team members. Individuals have to come together to study, learn, and plan.

To work at School C, an individual must be prepared to become an active member of the staff and the program. The principal at School C is very direct when employing individuals at School C, telling each candidate that they must

believe in the philosophy of the school and be dedicated to the program. The teachers noted that it has been difficult to get individuals to accept the current program because they were not involved in the initial planning. Individuals new to the school, who realize they cannot accept the program, transfer out of the building. The teachers interviewed expressed a feeling of satisfaction with the current staff because the new staff members are there by their own choice.

Theme II: The Principal as an Instructional Design Leader

The role of the principal at School C has encompassed decision making, public relations, and mediation. It has required the principal to take risks, share leadership, and encourage change. The principal at School C explains that opening a new school with alternative instructional design has been exhilarating as well as exhausting.

Entering into the process of opening a new school with an alternative delivery system required the principal to be knowledgeable about current educational trends and research regarding instructional design. It was necessary to research a variety of educational approaches. As the principal became involved in the process, the principal investigated alternative delivery systems and researched schools implementing different approaches. Site visits were completed during which other principals and teachers were interviewed about the decisions they made regarding their program. Eventually, the principal was able to share information with the Teacher Planning Team so that they could begin their research.

Selecting individuals to serve on the Teacher Planning Team was also the responsibility of the building level principal. He or she found that it was essential to select individuals who would support the change process as well as willingly put in the time and energy to develop a plan. A number of experienced individuals who had demonstrated flexibility expressed a desire to develop an alternative program. Once the Teacher Planning Team was formed, the principal allowed them to work and develop their own ideas. The principal stated, "The group came up with the final idea; there was no specific, preconceived idea."

As the planning progressed, the principal became the voice of the Teacher Planning Team, communicating their decisions and plans. His or her first level of communication was with school district officials, providing periodic updates at school board meetings. The principal's second level of communication was with district staff members, providing updates on the planning process. He or she also devoted a lot of time communicating with parents and members of the community through newsletters, district level publications such as the yearly calendar, and the local newspaper. The principal made contacts through parent-teacher organizations and attended meetings held in parents' homes to provide information. He or she explained with a laugh, "I attended lots of teas."

Providing organization to the planning process also required the principal's attention. The principal provided the impetus to keep the planning process moving forward. He or she kept the Teacher Planning Team on a timeline and set up a Planning Action Chart that listed specific tasks that needed to be

completed. The principal delegated responsibilities to the Teacher Planning Team and provided assistance when necessary.

Since School C opened, the principal's role has been to monitor the program. In doing so, the principal has selected staff members who are committed to the program and the program's philosophy. This has proven to be difficult at times and resulted in handling a constant change in teaching staff. Teachers have indicated that the principal has had to work with teachers who have been assigned to the school but have not bought into the program. The teachers expressed a need for the principal to be stronger about telling new staff members what to expect and how much work is involved with the program.

The principal has continued to work closely with parents. He or she stated that the parents of children attending the school expect to be involved and have extremely high expectations. The principal explains that the parents are "like a private school parent group" and have a sense of entitlement. Communication is key with these individuals. He or she is also firm with them, ensuring that their presence in the building is not disruptive to instruction and school activities.

School C's program is protected and defended by the school's principal. The principal's role as an educational leader is defined as that of researcher, organizer, mediator, advocate, and developer. He or she provides guidance and navigates the school through conflicts, growth, and development. The principal is required to be progressive, fostering change that ultimately meets the educational needs of the students through unique means and controversy. Within an environment that questions the school's methods and progress, the

principal defends and encourages teachers to take risks and focus on the uniqueness of the program. He or she models risk taking, enthusiasm, long hours, and dedication.

Theme III: The Instructional Design Creates a Learning Community

The instructional model at School C is based on the principal's and teachers' conviction that students need to be involved in child-centered instruction. The principal and teachers believe that they are responsible for education that promotes academic growth but also social and emotional growth. The school's mission statement states that education results from learning experiences that promote social, emotional, and academic growth, based on the learner's developmental readiness. School C's belief statements further state that education is the shared responsibility of students, educators, and the community. These statements accentuate the principal's and teachers' commitment to developing a supportive community for students.

Students at School C are a part of three distinct communities within their school. These include their classroom, the inclusive school community in which their classroom is located, and the whole school community. Each of these levels offers students opportunities to be contributing members of a larger group, as well as a chance to personally connect with other students and staff members.

The classroom community is created by students being assigned to a teacher for a two year duration through looping. The looping process allows students to remain with a teacher for two or more consecutive years. This begins

in first grade with students looping in first to second grade, third to fourth grade, and fifth to sixth grade. Citing the research of Jim Grant, educator, consultant, and executive director of the Society for Developmental Education, and Dr. John Goodlad, Professor of Education and Director of the Center for Educational Renewal, the principal explains that the looping process offers students and teachers a relationship that enhances learning. The principal, explained that looping allows teachers to know their students over a two-year period. This offers both teachers and students a chance to connect on a personal level as well as an academic level. With this knowledge, a child's academic needs can be better diagnosed and, as a result, addressed in a thorough manner involving parents and educators.

The second level of community forms in each of the inclusive school communities. Students experience working with other students from different grade levels for a variety of activities and sharing. This level of community, with the different grade levels, has a "different feel," teachers explain. This "different feel" is described as a sense of collaboration and coming together. They describe this mixing of students as valuable as students learn from each other through modeling and peer tutoring while working together on projects and presentations. Within the inclusive school communities, students are involved in community service projects. This includes responsibility for projects within the school, such as maintaining the cleanliness of an area of the building, as well as projects within the greater community, such as collecting food for the area food pantry.

The whole school community is a third level of community. This level involves students as members of the classroom, a small learning community, and the whole school. To reinforce this whole school membership, students work together for the benefit of everyone attending the school. An example is a schoolwide parade held each fall. The students celebrate the start of the new year by parading around the city blocks surrounding the school carrying banners and signs announcing that school has started. This celebration reinforces the students' membership in School C.

Summary

The principal and teachers at School C have developed an instructional design that allows students to experience an educational environment that focuses on their social, emotional, and academic needs. The program has experienced continuous growth and development as the result of teachers' commitment to the program and a willingness to work as collegial teams. To begin the program, the teachers have had to put in extra time to create learning communities that effectively meet student needs and encourage student progress. Teachers have been fully involved in the development of the program and its evolution.

The principal has been an instructional design leader. The principal has supported and maintained the integrity of the program. The principal advocates for the staff members and students by insisting that the program continue to develop and adjust in order to meet student needs.

The program developed by the educators of School C provides a learning environment that allows students and staff members to feel a sense of community. Staff members have created learning opportunities through looping, multiage, and cross graded classrooms that allow students to know their teachers and other students within their community. The principal has assigned staff members to a looping model that creates a two-year or more connection between students and their teachers.

The State of Minnesota testing results and the state level report card show that students are making adequate yearly progress. School C is ranked as a three star school.

Conclusion

Chapter IV reported the research data collected on three Minnesota elementary schools that house small learning communities. The findings were reported as a multiple case study. Within each school, three common themes emerged:

- Theme I: Teacher involvement and commitment.
- Theme II: The principal as an instructional design leader.
- Theme III: The instructional design creates a learning community.

Each of the schools examined are at different stages of development of the small learning communities. Examining these stages creates a complete overview of small learning communities from conception to operation.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine small learning community models currently developed within larger elementary schools and to identify practices used by educators to ensure the success of the small learning community. Information was collected from three small learning communities within larger elementary schools in three Minnesota school districts. A multiple case study utilized pre-existing data collected at the three elementary schools through an educational leadership internship in fall 2003. Examination of the information collected identifies common themes and emerging patterns common to small learning communities.

Summary of Findings

Data collected were examined to answer six research questions. The three schools examined provided answers to each question. Although each school had varying practices, common themes emerged that provided answers to each question. The findings are summarized.

Research Question #1. Why Were Small Learning Communities Organized?

The three elementary schools in this study had small learning communities with unique and distinct characteristics. The small learning

communities were organized as a means to create an authentic sense of community within the larger school and allow for greater personalization of instruction. Despite the unique approaches used to develop the small learning communities, the building configurations, the student populations, and the personal educational beliefs of the teachers and educators in each of the schools held common philosophies supporting the purpose for developing small learning communities:

- creating a learning community with an intimate environment that provided students with a comfortable, yet challenging, environment for learning.
- personalizing education for students in a large population school setting.
- developing an alternative instructional design which facilitates meeting the social, emotional, and academic needs of students.

The rationale used by educators correlates with the literature on small learning communities. Current research supports the rationale used in the three elementary schools in this study:

- Within a small learning community, every student is well known. Educators develop relationships with students that extend over more than one year (Cotton, 2001).
- Small learning communities are developed as a means to personalize education by organizing the learning environment around the students' needs (Cotton, 2001; Jenkins & Keefe, 2000; Vander Ark, 2002).

- The focus of instruction in a small learning community is geared toward high expectations and the academic achievement of all students (Cotton, 2001).

The development of the small learning communities enabled each of the schools to create a sense of community that provided an intimate environment for learning. This environment provided students with membership in three levels of community within the school that offered a means to personalizing education. The three levels of community included the classroom community, the small learning community, and the whole school community (Appendix J). Each of these communities developed their own culture that transcended to the next level of community.

The classroom setting developed its own culture and served as a micro-community within the larger school community. One teacher worked with 20 to 30 students. A teacher-student relationship developed that allowed the teacher to determine students' interests and needs. The teacher personalized learning by focusing instruction on the individual needs of the students. This relationship allowed students to develop a sense of belonging and individuality through their classroom. The classroom setting provided students opportunities to make decisions, learn personal and group interaction skills, and develop a sense of belonging.

The small learning community encompassed a group of classrooms and offered a second layer of community outside of the immediate classroom. In this setting, students had opportunities to work with other teachers and meet other

students. A second level of culture developed as behavioral and academic practices transcended from the classroom to the small learning community. Students experienced a new sense of community as they developed identity outside of their classroom. Greater intimacy also developed when students had the opportunity to work within the small learning community for more than one year. Looping, multiage classes, and multi-grade classes provided a means for building relationships between students and teachers.

The final level of community in these schools was the whole school, which included every student and staff member in the school. This level of community encompassed all the classrooms and the small learning communities. Students developed a sense of belonging to the whole school community. The skills students developed in the classroom and the small learning community helped define the whole school culture.

Personalization of education in each of these schools started in the classroom where a single teacher developed a relationship with a group of students. In a small school setting, where students are well known by the school's educators, personalization expands outside the classroom and becomes a part of the whole school culture (Cotton, 1996; Raywid, 1996; Vander Ark, 2002).

In the schools studied, small learning communities offered a means for personalization to expand outside of the classroom, within a large school. The small learning community teachers brought the separate classrooms together, forming a new level of community. As a result, teachers learned about their own

students through the observations of other teachers in the small learning community. Using a collaborative process involving two or more teachers, student progress was examined. Teachers had the opportunity to learn from the perspectives of their colleagues to personalize each student's instruction.

The small learning communities in the schools studied allowed educators an opportunity to develop and implement an alternative instructional organization for meeting the social, emotional, and academic needs of students. Each of the three elementary schools examined used alternative methods of instructional organization that allowed for continuous progress programming, looping, and multi-grade organization. In the schools with small learning communities, making changes to an alternative instructional organization involved a group of teachers working together to design and develop an alternative instructional program. Working together allowed the teachers to sustain their efforts through shared leadership, collaboration, and common philosophical educational beliefs about how children learn. The small learning community educators worked together toward the same goal of meeting students' needs using a non-conventional approach that fitted students' learning styles.

Research Question #2. How Were Small Learning Communities Organized?

The organization of each of the small learning communities in this study was unique. There was no single or specific plan for the organization of the small learning communities. Organizational practices included continuous

progress programming, looping, and multi-grade organization. Despite these organizational differences, commonalities existed:

- The development of community started within the classroom and continued to grow through the development of the small learning community and the whole school community.
- The small learning communities were organized around a specific philosophical belief about how students learn.

Students and teachers were a part of three distinct communities within their school (Appendix K). These included the classroom, the small learning community in which their classroom is located, and the whole school community. Each of these levels offered students opportunities to be contributing members of a larger group as well as a chance to personally connect with other students and staff members.

At the center of each school's community was the classroom. The classroom was an encapsulated community that included a teacher and a group of students. In the classroom, the teacher developed relationships with the students through which the teacher learned about the students' social, emotional and academic needs. The teacher established procedures and practices that ensured an orderly environment and instruction.

The next level in the organizational pattern in the schools is the small learning community. Students in two to five classrooms are grouped together to form a small learning community. The small learning community offers another avenue for further personalization. This occurred as students had opportunities

to work with other adults, practice new and developing skills with other students, and expand their relationships beyond the classroom. Students were known by more than one teacher. There were opportunities for teachers to observe students and develop a greater understanding of the students' needs.

The third level of organization was the schoolwide community. To create the schoolwide community, educators and parents came together to focus attention on the school's common attributes. Through the schoolwide community, students developed membership in the larger community, building on their membership in the classroom and the small learning community. They were able to transcend the interpersonal and group skills learned in the classroom to the small learning community and the whole school community.

The small learning communities offer students an intermediate level of membership in the school community. While they experienced community membership in their classrooms, they were provided a second, broader level of membership in the small learning community. This intermediate level provided a small, personal environment for students and staff that allowed the creation of a familiar, caring, positive educational program. The small learning community teachers functioned as a team and developed supportive professional relationships. They formed effective learning environments that personalized education for the students.

Small learning communities were designed around a common philosophical belief about how students learn. In each of the three schools, a common philosophical belief formed a connection between the teachers in the

community. In two of the three schools, teachers stated it was essential that educators within the small learning community needed to share the same philosophical beliefs. In schools without small learning communities, teachers can be isolated and focused on their own classroom. They function on their own belief of how students learn and the methods to be used (Fine & Sommerville, 1998; Meier, 1996; Wagner, 2001).

In schools with small learning communities, teachers collaborate and work together to create an intimate learning environment. They discuss their beliefs and build on each other's perspectives, but their fundamental beliefs do not change. A teacher, who is not congruent with the philosophical beliefs of the other teachers, will be uncomfortable and may find himself or herself isolated. The principals interviewed at each of the schools explained that unless an individual shared the same beliefs as the other teachers, he or she would not be hired.

Research Question #3. How Did Small Learning Communities Operate?

There was no single mode of operation in the small learning communities in this study. Each school established small learning communities based on common philosophical beliefs about instructional design. There are some commonalities that are prevalent in two or all three schools:

- establishment of a classroom community.
- classroom organization and appearance.
- classroom management and methods.

- facilities.
- teachers as leaders and sharing decision making.
- teachers accepting responsibility for student learning.
- collaboration among teachers.

There are few differences in the operations of a school with small learning communities and schools without. In each school in this study, daily operations were similar. The schools with small learning communities continually focused on an organizational style that created an autonomous, distinct small learning community made up of two or more classrooms clustered together which functioned as a separate entity from the classrooms in the school.

The classroom teachers in the small learning communities are instrumental to the students' learning and success. They establish a classroom setting that enhances the educational process through interactive learning activities, books, and technology. The teachers established rules and procedures that coordinated the students' activities and contributed to an orderly environment.

There are operational and instructional practices that contributed to establishing an intimacy amongst the members of the small learning community. Operationally, this included classroom clustering, methods for selecting and hiring new teachers, and teacher meetings. Instructional methods included teacher collaboration, student grouping practices, and team teaching.

In each school, the classrooms that made up the small learning communities were in a cluster that encouraged interaction and communication:

teacher to teacher, student to teacher, and student to student. Teachers and students worked together in shared spaces such as classrooms and study areas.

To be a teacher in the small learning communities required an individual to have the same philosophical beliefs as the other teachers in the program. This made the hiring process especially important. Teachers and principals at two of the schools indicated that teachers had to demonstrate a knowledge of the collaborative aspects needed to work in a small learning community. At each school, teachers and principals indicated that the individuals joining these small learning communities had to be highly committed to the philosophical beliefs of the program. A new teacher needed to be prepared to work beyond the teachers' contracted day in order to plan, organize, and develop the program.

Teacher meetings were important to the development of the small learning communities in each of the three schools. Educators indicated that these meetings needed to be more than a series of announcements. Meetings were held on a regular basis and involved teachers working together to analyze student data, discuss instruction, and plan for activities.

Collaboration was an essential part of each small learning community. Teachers established meeting times, either during the school day or outside of it, to discuss student data, ideas, and to plan together. Interaction provided a means for improving instruction and monitoring student progress.

In two schools, in which the small learning communities had become established, looping was a method of classroom grouping that encouraged the development of an intimate learning environment. Looping created a stronger,

long-term relationship between students and their teachers. This approach allowed teachers the opportunity to establish closer relationships with students and their families, giving teachers more knowledge about each student's needs.

Students were also divided into cross grade and multiage groups for special projects and instruction. Students had an opportunity to meet other students within the small learning communities, develop relationships through projects, and peer tutoring. Educators in each building indicated that these groupings helped students learn from each other as well as offer opportunities for interaction that contributed to a sense of community.

Team teaching or teachers planning and teaching together was used at each school as an instructional approach that allowed students to meet and form relationships with other adults besides their classroom teacher. This approach provided another opportunity for students to meet other students.

The varied approaches used to operate the small learning communities emerged out of the commonly held philosophical beliefs of the educators at each school. Each small learning community attempted to create a learning environment that encouraged the social, emotional, and academic growth for students. This resulted in operations that were student centered and focused on research-based practices for meeting students' academic, social, and emotional needs.

Research Question #4. How Were Teachers Involved in the Development and Implementation of a Small Learning Community?

Teacher involvement and commitment formed the foundation of each small learning community's success. Teachers were highly involved in establishing the philosophy that served as the guiding principle behind the instructional design and operation of the small learning communities. They were empowered to make educational decisions that focused on student learning and success. Teachers in each small learning community were involved in a Site Council or building leadership team that guided decision making and operations in each school. They created the instructional design and collaborated in order to monitor student progress and to monitor instructional practices.

Teachers were involved in the hiring of new staff in each school and had a voice in decisions about individuals who joined the staff. They ensured that anyone who was hired shared the philosophical beliefs that they held. To do this required them to be a part of the interviewing process as well as making a final recommendation to the school board.

Teachers developed autonomy that allowed them to make decisions regarding the operations of the small learning community, the teaching techniques used to instruct district curriculum, and to hire staff members with shared philosophical beliefs. They actively supported their instructional practices and advocated for the continued development of their programs.

Research Question #5. How Does the School Principal Support the Small Learning Community?

The principal is integral to the initiation, development, and implementation of the small learning communities. The principal is an instructional design leader who advocates for the small learning communities and supports the instructional strategies designed by the teachers. Advocacy requires the principal to be well informed about the small learning community's philosophy and operations, method of organization, and instructional practices used by teachers. This includes monitoring students' progress by examining standardized test scores, observing instruction, and frequent discussions with parents. The principal had to recognize the culture that developed within the small learning community as well as the impact each small learning community had on the culture of the whole school.

The principal was key to promoting the program in the small learning community. To do this, the principal was required to explain the philosophy and operations of the small learning community to parents, community members, and other members of the school district including the school board and district administrators. The principal supported the small learning community by upholding its philosophy when making decisions, hiring, and managing school issues and concerns.

To further support the small learning community, the principal needed to maintain a balance between the autonomy the small learning community required and the leadership role that is essential to managing a school. This was done

through school leadership committees made up of teachers and the principal. Teachers worked with the principals to manage budgetary concerns, whole school management, and the development of procedures. The principal also provided teachers with opportunities to hire new teachers for the small learning community. In doing so, the principal supported the philosophical beliefs and ensured the hiring of highly qualified teachers.

The principal was responsible for identifying professional development needs of the teachers in the small learning communities. Working with the teachers, professional development activities were developed to be site specific and aligned with the goals of the small learning community. The principal also ensured that teachers received instruction on state standards and requirements. The principal also worked to provide staff members with sufficient time for collaboration.

The principal was the overseer of the small learning communities in the school. It was the role of the principal to provide assistance with all areas of instruction and management in the small learning community. This included working with parents, handling student needs and issues, and managing conflict and productivity in the small learning community. The presence of small learning communities in a school allows a principal to foster a culture of personalization and familiarity. It also requires the principal to balance the small learning communities' autonomy with the overall needs of the whole school community.

Research Question #6. How Did Small Learning Communities Affect the Culture of a School?

To understand the impact the small learning communities have on the culture in each of these schools requires a review of culture as defined and explained by Deal and Peterson (1999). In their research, they explain that school success is fostered by a culture that focuses on student success, high expectations, innovation, dialogue, and the search for new ideas. They continue their explanation by citing studies that identified successful schools as those with a culture where there was caring, sharing, and mutual help among all members of the school community. Using this explanation, it is evident that the school cultures in each of the schools studied have strong, success orientated cultures.

In each school, a strong culture has developed through collegial staff relationships, commitment by educators to develop and preserve the small learning communities, staff collaboration, and innovation. These characteristics have expanded, evolved, and transformed as internal and external forces, such as teachers terminating their involvement with the small learning communities, and changes in educational rules and regulations have revolved around them. Activities that included teacher collaboration time, incorporating new approaches, and adjusting to student needs fortified the culture, transcending it to a new level.

The culture was further strengthened by the personalization of instruction for students. Students were known by several adults in the school due to the small learning communities. They were able to benefit from their classroom culture and then experience another level of culture in the small learning

community, as well as in the whole school. Students had opportunities for greater involvement with other members of the small learning community, including other students and adults. This ensured that they had interactions that allowed them to be observed and known by a number of adults who then worked together to personalize instruction.

Major Conclusions

This study examined three small learning communities in Minnesota elementary schools. Primary data were examined for emerging categories, patterns, and themes describing small learning communities. A triangulation of the data was completed through empirical induction where generalizations from the information collected identified emerging themes of small learning communities. Three common themes emerged:

- Theme I: Teacher involvement and commitment.
- Theme II: The principal as an instructional design leader.
- Theme III: The instructional design creates a learning community.

Conclusions on each of these themes have been developed based on the data analysis. Each of these is presented.

Conclusions on Teacher Involvement and Commitment

Research findings in the literature on small learning communities clearly state that teacher involvement and commitment are essential to the successful development of small learning communities (Cotton, 2001; Meier, 1996; Raywid, 1996). In the small learning communities in this study, the level of teacher commitment was linked to their level of involvement. In School B and

School C, teachers demonstrated ownership in the programs developed in the small learning communities. Their involvement began with the conception of the small learning communities in their schools and continued as the small learning communities have developed. Their commitment to an educational philosophy has sustained the small learning communities. The small learning communities continue to thrive even with changes in personnel. Teacher involvement is ongoing as the small learning communities evolve. Teachers collaborate in an effort to ensure that student needs are being met through the educational practices instituted in the small learning communities.

In School A, the teacher involvement has been limited. The small learning communities in this school are the result of structural changes brought about by a new building. Teacher involvement has been initiated by structural changes. As a result, through teacher meetings and the continued growth of the professional learning community, teacher commitment developed. The small learning communities have become valued and appreciated as teachers collaborate, are trained, and work within the small learning communities. If teachers are increasingly involved in the development of the small learning communities, it is predictable that teacher commitment will continue to grow.

When originating programs in small learning communities, teachers need to do the following:

- work from a shared instructional philosophy.
- be empowered to act on their philosophy through participation in program development.

- demonstrate commitment through continued involvement in planning, changing, and monitoring the instructional design of the small learning community.
- participate in professional development on small learning communities as well as the development of school culture, teaming, and collaboration.

Conclusions on the Principal's Role in Schools With Small Learning Communities

In each of the three schools examined, the principal shared and supported the educational philosophy of the small learning community. This required the principal to take on a number of specific roles:

- encouraging teacher leadership while providing direction and maintaining authority.
- explaining the small learning community through communications with staff, parents, and members of the school district.
- maintaining the integrity of the small learning community by upholding the educational philosophy of the program when hiring new staff, selecting an instructional design, and making operational decisions.
- monitoring and adjusting the instructional design while maintaining the educational philosophy of the program.
- providing time for collaboration between teachers while providing individual support.

- monitoring student progress to ensure continual growth of students' academic, social, and emotional growth.

Conclusions on the Effect of the Instructional Design on the Learning Community

Each of the small learning communities examined provided students and educators with a sense of belonging and membership in a group that was focused on meeting students' academic, social, and emotional needs. This was created through the following:

- an instructional design, such as looping, that created a close relationship between the students and their teacher.
- learning experiences that allowed students to work in multiage and cross grade level settings.
- teachers using student data to plan and develop instructional practices.
- opportunities for students to become a part of a classroom community, a small learning community, and a whole school community.

Conclusions on the Common Characteristics of Small Learning Communities

In the research literature reviewed in Chapter II, small schools have been identified as creating a positive learning environment where students receive a personalized education in a positive, humane, and caring atmosphere and demonstrate strong attachment, persistence, and performance (Lashway, 1998). Small learning communities have developed as a means for reaping these benefits of a small school. While the physical arrangements of small learning communities differ, there are common characteristics that are prevalent:

autonomy, leadership and decision making, identity, personalization, instructional focus, and accountability.

There is evidence that each of the schools in this study has established some or all of the characteristics in the small learning communities at a variety of levels. At School B and School C, these characteristics have become embedded over time and through the development of the small learning communities. At School A, these characteristics are emerging but are not fully embedded into the small learning communities.

A number of practices are implemented and thus establish the presence of each characteristic, resulting in effective, successful small learning communities. These practices are as follows. Appendix L provides a graphic look at these practices.

Autonomy is developed in a small learning community when it implements its own program with its own staff. Autonomy is established in the small learning communities in this study through the following practices:

- Small learning communities placed themselves into physical spaces that separated them from the rest of the school. The physical design of the school provided a natural division in School A and School C. Despite the traditional design of School C, the placement of the small learning communities into connected classrooms provided separation.
- The staff members in the small learning communities at School B and School C implemented their own unique educational programs. The programs offered students alternative approaches to learning.

- Staff members in School B and School C worked in the programs by their own choice. They took advantage of the opportunity to work in a unique educational setting and supported all aspects of the program.
- Staff members in each school had input on the small learning communities' budget. This was most prevalent at School C. The principal at School C shared budgeting details about each small learning community to all staff members. For the most part though, the principal at each school maintained and managed the school's budget.

Leadership and decision making are essential to characteristics in a small learning community. Leadership and decision making are shared amongst the stakeholders in a small learning community. Evidence of shared leadership and decision making were found in the following practices:

- Staff members at each school serve on a building leadership team through which they have a voice in decisions made regarding school operations.
- Teachers in School B and School C have direct involvement in hiring individuals who will become a part of the small learning community. In School B, teachers made the final selection.
- Teachers at School B and School C led the development of the small learning communy program. They have established organizational practices and instructional methods.
- The principal at each school oversees the small learning communities. Teachers at School B and School C function as independent entities.

They make decisions regarding the programming in the small learning communities and convey their decisions to the principal.

Creating a unique identity for a small learning community occurs through the establishment of vision, mission, and goals. The following practices establish identity in the small learning communities in this study:

- In each of the schools, the small learning communities achieved identity through the development of a community name. They also take on specific tasks, such as maintaining a hallway or recycling, which further establish their identity.
- The small learning communities at School B and School C developed a vision, mission, and goals that correspond with the vision, mission, and goals of the school. The mission, vision, and goals of the small learning communities are founded on the students' needs. In School A, each small learning community focuses on the vision, mission, and goals of the whole school.
- Staff members in School B and School C have self-selected to participate in the small learning communities. They share similar philosophical beliefs about education and methods of instruction that correspond to the basic beliefs of the small learning community.

Personalization of education is a characteristic of small learning communities that emulates a small populated school. It allows educators to know students' individual needs and characteristics. The following practices establish personalization in the small learning communities:

- Establishing the small learning communities in each school was a purposeful decision made to create an intimate, caring environment within a large school. The decision to move to the small learning communities was made by teachers, administrators, and school officials.
- In each school, teachers provided personalization through their involvement with students in their own classroom. In School B and School C, teachers provided further personalization by collaborating with each other on a weekly basis. In doing so, they reviewed student work and impressions of students when they had opportunities to work with those students not directly assigned to them. As a result, students were well known by all the teachers in the small learning community. In School A, personalization occurred only in the single graded classroom.
- In School B and School C, personalization increased when teachers worked with students for more than one year. This was accomplished through looping and multi-grade small learning communities. In School A, students remained with a teacher for one year.
- Teachers in School B and School C used instructional practices such as flexible grouping and peer mentoring to further meet the needs of their students. Teachers in School A have begun to meet together to learn how to use student work to facilitate improved instruction.

- Parents were involved with their student's academic growth and school activities at each school. There was increased parent involvement when students worked with the same teacher or remained in the small learning community for more than one year. This was prevalent at School B and School C.

Creating instructional focus in a small learning community is essential to providing students with comprehensive instruction through which students demonstrate progress. When establishing instructional focus, educators set high standards for all students. Collaboration is key to sharing information and planning instruction around student needs. Educators maintain their instructional focus through professional development opportunities focused on student achievement. The following practices established instructional focus in the small learning communities in this study:

- Students are placed in heterogeneous classes in each school. Students in the small learning communities are not selected or grouped by common traits or ability.
- Teachers in each small learning community established high expectations and focused on student achievement.
- Collaboration occurred on a weekly basis between teachers in the small learning community. During these collaboration sessions, teachers planned instruction, discussed students, and relied on each other's observations and suggestions.

- Professional development focused on the instructional needs of the students in the small learning communities. In School B and School C, teachers chose professional development activities that increased collegiality and focused on student instructional needs.

Using multiple forms of assessment allows educators to establish accountability in small learning communities. Educators use a variety of assessments to determine student progress on state and local goals. The following practices establish accountability in the small learning communities in this study:

- Multiple assessments were used by teachers in all of the schools to determine student progress and level of success.
- Teachers relied on each other for input on student progress. Through collaboration, teachers discussed student progress on formal and informal assessments.
- Assessment results were used to determine professional development needs.

At each school, these practices created a school culture that was focused on student achievement. Decisions regarding curriculum, scheduling, and professional development were based on the needs of students. A collaborative culture emerged in each small learning community.

Each of the small learning communities in this study developed over time. In School A, the small learning communities are slowly developing after one year of operation. The small learning communities in School B and School C have

emerged to their current status over a period of 8 to 14 years. Each school has faced difficulties and growing pains through the course of their development. These include the following problems:

- Developing a small learning community requires teacher dedication and time. Teachers need to learn about establishing small learning communities and understand the rationale for establishing this type of learning environment.
- Planning in each school requires extensive amounts of time. Teachers working in the small learning communities work extra hours outside of their contract day. Teachers indicated that they were willing to work the extra time but also found it to be wearing. In School B, some teachers requested a transfer out of the school because of the time commitment.
- Professional etiquette has been essential in each small learning community. Teachers have had to work closely with each other and this demanded mutual respect. Teachers found that they needed to learn to problem solve together as well as manage conflict amongst themselves.
- It has been essential that teachers learn about each other's programs. Professional envy had to be managed in all of the schools when teachers felt one program was favored over their own. Principals indicated that they needed to educate teachers about all the aspects of

each small learning community. This included providing information on student selection, curriculum, and the budget.

- Implementing small learning communities takes time. Educators need to be prepared to spend years developing the small learning community. Principals explained that it was essential to start out slowly and to take small, incremental steps when developing the small learning community.

Recommendations

This study supported previous research by education practitioners who suggest that small learning communities provide a means for students and educators to experience the educational benefits of a small school within a large school building. The following recommendations are offered to educators interested in implementing small learning communities.

1. Small learning communities should be considered as a viable means for creating authentic, caring communities in large elementary schools. A small learning community is a means for recognizing that students have a need to feel attachment and a sense of belonging in order to be successful at school. Educators inquiring into the development of small learning communities will find that this organizational approach allows for students in large schools to experience a sense of community at school similar to that found in a small school setting. Therefore, the small learning community is a viable means for creating

a positive school community that transcends into a positive school culture.

2. The decision to move to small learning communities requires educators to be highly involved in planning, development, and implementation. A planning team needs to be organized with members who will be stakeholders in the small learning community. This includes the principal, teachers, district level administrators, and parents. Teachers who are involved in the implementation need to identify the purpose for developing the small learning community and be dedicated to a shared educational philosophy. During the planning process, it is essential that educators review the research on the characteristics of small learning communities. They then need to examine practices that will establish these characteristics.
3. Principals involved with the implementation of the small learning community must be prepared to take an active role in supporting, promoting, and maintaining the program. The principal needs to be involved in the initial planning and development of the small learning community, serving as a member of the planning committee. The principal also needs to understand the role administration plays in the small learning community. This is a role that requires balancing teacher autonomy with the needs of the whole school. It also requires the principal to be an advocate for the program, communicating the philosophy and practices to teachers, district officials, and district

stakeholders. The principal must also market the small learning community, recommending it to students and parents.

4. Working in small learning communities requires educators to meet and collaborate in order to facilitate planning and organizing. Small learning communities support collaboration and, generally, do not allow teachers to become isolated. Therefore, teachers must be prepared to meet weekly and plan together. Adult issues such as professional envy must be addressed in a direct, purposeful manner.
5. Student data need to be used to determine instructional design. Teachers need to use student assessments, standardized test results, and daily work to determine the educational programming within the small learning community. Working together, teachers need to share student data with each other and provide each other with assistance, determining the best ways to meet student needs.

   Student data must also be used to determine the effectiveness of the practices being used in the small learning community. Educators must be prepared to use the findings to adjust or change practices so as to best meet student needs.
6. Educators developing small learning communities need professional development opportunities in order to learn about the characteristics of small learning communities and the practices used to establish these characteristics.

7. Plans to develop a small learning community need to include a process that allows students to work with teachers over an extended period of time of two or more years. This includes implementing practices such as looping, multiage groupings, and cross grade experiences. Within the small learning community, students should be at varying ability levels and grade levels.
8. Small learning communities need to become established over an extended period of time that allows for educators to fully develop the program. Educators should expect to take five to seven years to fully implement a small learning community.
9. Schools with small learning communities need to provide a means for communicating about the small learning community. School newsletters and websites should be developed to provide information to educators and parents about the small learning community's philosophy and practices.

Recommendations for Further Study

A number of schools in the United States have developed small learning communities in large schools. Opinions and strong feelings have been formed as to the effectiveness to this approach to instructional design. Further studies that accurately describe the multiple instructional designs of small learning communities need to be explored as well as the effects these instructional models have on student success. The need for further research has resulted in the following recommendations:

1. further study to determine if students in small learning communities demonstrate significantly improved academic progress over students in large schools.
2. studies to determine the length of time necessary for small learning communities to become established and fully operational.
3. further case studies to determine other instructional designs used in small learning communities.
4. studies to determine parent satisfaction with small learning communities.
5. studies to determine student satisfaction with small learning communities.
6. studies to determine teacher satisfaction with small learning communities.
7. studies to determine the academic, social, and emotional growth of at-risk students in small learning communities.
8. studies to compare the social and emotional growth of male and female students in small learning communities.
9. studies to determine the long-term effects of small learning communities on students' social, emotional, and academic growth.

Small learning communities should be considered as a viable means for creating authentic, caring communities in large elementary schools. This multiple case study demonstrated that small learning communities provide students with a supportive learning environment focused on their social, emotional, and

academic growth. When a deliberate, focused process is used to plan, develop, and implement small learning communities, a large school has the opportunity to experience the advantages of a small school: a positive learning environment where students receive a personalized education in a positive, caring atmosphere that encourages personal growth and academic achievement.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Moorhead Elementary Education
LEARNING COMMUNITY BELIEFS

Elementary Design Committee
Planning Session on April 24, 2002

In all Moorhead Elementary Schools:

1. Collaboration amongst staff, students, and parents is valued.
2. Cross grade level experiences are necessary.
3. Social emotional learning is as important as academic learning.
4. A continuum of support and enrichment services is accessible to students at each building.
5. Parents feel welcome and have opportunities for participation.
6. There is equity in district provided resources.
7. Students feel welcome and have a sense of belonging. Positive relationships are fostered.
8. Student needs and curriculum drive instruction.
9. Each school campus is attractive and supports learning inside and out.
10. Curriculum is articulated and consistently delivered.

Appendix B

Small Learning Communities
Staff Input Survey

Research has been completed by two ISD 152 committees on small learning communities (SLC). The first committee, a study group of staff and community members, used the research to provide guidance in the design of the new elementary buildings during Summer 2002. The second, and current, committee is the Elementary Configuration Task Force made up of administrators and lementary teachers. The task force has reviewed current research on SLC and is seeking input on the design of the SLC in the new schools. The task force will make a final recommendation to the Elementary Implementation Team in late February.

SLC are an attempt to replicate the positive characteristics of small schools in larger buildings. They are characterized by teachers work in teams and controlling their own curriculum delivery. SLC can be designed around a single grade level, varied grade levels, or be multiage. Students may remain in an SLC for more than one year. SLC continually evolve and take 5-7 years to develop.

1. What do you envision SLC looking like in Moorhead's elementary schools? How do you see SLC meeting the needs of students?

2. What are your hopes and dreams for the SLC in Moorhead's elementary schools?

3. What do you see as the challenges to developing SLC in Moorhead's elementary schools?

Please add other comments on the back that may assist the task force in developing a final recommendation for the Elementary Implementation Team. We will be discussing your ideas on small learning communities when we meet in new school groups.

Appendix C
Letter of Request for Information

Dear _____,

The Moorhead Area Public Schools will be transitioning to new K-5 elementary schools in the Fall of 2004. These schools will house 750-800 students. Elementary staff members would like to explore the concept of small learning communities in these sites. To do so, the Elementary Implementation Team, a team of teachers, administrators, and parents, would like to explore learning communities such as those in your school. With your permission, we would like to visit with you and your staff members to learn more about the development and implementation of this concept.

As a Moorhead principal currently on sabbatical and interning with Moorhead Superintendent, Dr. Larry Nybladh, I would appreciate being able to visit your school to meet with you and staff members to discuss the process you used to develop the learning community. With the transition to new schools less than a year away, we are eager to find out the best practices used in the development of learning communities for students.

To help facilitate our research, I would ask to meet with you individually and with teachers directly involved in the learning community as well as those not involved. If possible, I would like to observe in the learning community. I would also ask for your suggestions on other contacts that will further our learning.

Thank you for considering my request. We will greatly appreciate any assistance you, and your staff, can give us. I will follow this letter with email to you during the week of August 18th to hear your thoughts on my request.

Sincerely,

Mary Jo Schmid

Appendix D
Interview Questions

1. Please describe your program for me. Please explain what you believe are the attributes as well as drawbacks to the program.

2. What is the history of the program? How did it begin and what was the reason behind its conception? Who initiated the program and what was their reasoning?

3. How does the program fit into the physical setting of the building? Was the building designed or modified for the program?

4. What do administrators need to know before implementing this type of a program?

5. What do teachers need to know before implementing this type of a program?

6. How do parents feel about the program? What do they see as benefits or drawbacks to the program?

7. How do other teachers within this school view the program? Why do they feel the way they do?

8. What kind of success do students experience that is unique to the program?

9. Is there any other information or advice that you can offer to other educators considering changing to this type of a program?

Appendix E
PowerPoint Presentation on Small Learning Communities

Slides

1

Research Completed by the Elementary Configuration Task Force
Small Learning Communities

2

Purpose:
To explore the research supporting small learning communities and to recommend to the Elementary Implementation Team a plan for configuring small learning communities within the Moorhead Elementary Schools.

3

Why are we exploring the use of small learning communities in the Moorhead Elementary Schools?

4

The Facility and Grade Level Configuration Community Task Force Report recommended that...

5

"...K-5 facilities where the school within a school concept can be designed and incorporated within the educational setting. It is imperative that the school district incorporate small learning communities within the three elementary school facilities."

6

The Facility and Grade Level Configuration Community Task Force Report also states...

7

"Providing a safe, secure, and family type environment within a larger school will create for the students a sense of belonging and well-being. It will also provide greater opportunities for participation in programs, services, and activities."

8

More importantly...

9

We want to develop a purposeful community where all members are committed to thinking, growing, and inquiry; Where learning is an attitude, not just an activity.

10
Every child needs one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her.

There is no recipe for community building–No workshops, agendas, or training packages. Community cannot be borrowed or bought (Sergiovanni, 1994).

11
Inventing a community does not mean we start from scratch. We already have a rich foundation in classroom community.

12
The need for community becomes urgent when we consider the consequences of its loss. We need to find ways to provide our students with a secure place to grow, play, create, and develop relationships with adults (Sergiovanni, 1994).

13
Communities are organized around relationships and ideas (Sergiovanni, 1994).

14
When students lose a sense of community they have two options:
- Create a substitute
- Live without community

15
Community results in
- Personalized learning
- Discipline
- Safety
- Stronger relationships
- Increased communication
- Trust

16
What are learning communities?
Why should we consider incorporating them into our elementary program?

17
Research conducted over the past 15 years has convincingly demonstrated that small schools are superior to large schools on many measures and equal to them on the rest (Cotton, 2001).

18
The data indicate that small schools:
Raise student achievement, especially for minority and low-income students
Reduce disruptive behavior
Combat anonymity and isolation
Improve school climate
Increase parent and community involvement

19
In response to the evidence for the learning and social benefits in small schools, there has been a movement to downsize large schools into small learning communities housed within the same school building.

20
We want to use the positive attributes of small schools in our larger buildings.

21
Small Learning Communities share the same principal, programs, and services within the building.

22
Characteristics of Small Learning Communities
Teachers work in teams
Students may remain in a SLC for more than one year
Designed around a single grade level, varied grade levels, or be multi-aged.
Take 5-7 years to evolve
Not all SLC are alike.
Each may have some or all of these characteristics

23
Types of Small Learning Communities
House Plan: assigns students and teachers to a smaller grouping within the larger school
Mini School: adds curricular and instructional changes to the house plan
School within a School: separate schools running as separate entities all within one building
Multi School: the entire building is made up of schools within a school, usually 3

24
Advantages for Students
Personalized learning environment
Students are well known by a group of teachers
The students know each other
Safer environment
Teachers discuss students across classes and over the years

Greater opportunities for involvement
Improved attendance
Greater academic growth
Greater parent participation

25
Organizational needs that must be addressed when organizing small learning communities:
Staff Roles and Responsibilities
Scheduling
Team Teaching Models
Curriculum Themes
Design and Space

26
Staff in Small Learning Communities:
To be effective the staff in the SLC should believe in the philosophy of the SLC
Staff have shared responsibilities
Staff should be aware of independent responsibilities
Times to collaborate should be worked in as part of a schedule for each SLC
Peer coaching and mentoring should be included
Support for staff during the transitions

27
Misconceptions of SLC
SMALL DOES NOT MEAN GOOD.
There HAS to be structure and purpose.
Small learning community doesn't mean significantly small class sizes.

28
Ideas the Task Force has discussed:
The size of a small learning community should be no more than 200 students.
Each SLC would be considered a neighborhood.
In the new Moorhead Elementary Schools, we are considering neighborhoods of 5 classrooms due to the physical layouts of the buildings.
Neighborhoods could take on a variety of forms.
The Moorhead Elementary Schools will focus on the developmental needs of children.

Appendix F
Final Recommendation on Small Learning Communities
of the
Elementary Configuration Task Force
March 3, 2004

Statement of the Decision: What are we trying to decide?

How do we configure small learning communities (SLC) to meet the needs of students?

Established and Classified Objectives: determine what we want or need in a final choice and identify which objectives are mandatory.

Musts: Those objectives that are mandatory in our decision

1. Sense of belonging
2. Teacher collaboration: schoolwide, grade level, SLC
3. Meeting students' social and emotional needs
4. Safe environment: climate, secure
5. Focus on student achievement
6. Support staff is immersed in SLC
7. Long-term commitment to the implementation to SLC
8. Timeline for implementation
9. Variety of instructional strategies: teacher directed to reach all kids
10. Spanish immersion is mixed with English speaking classrooms
11. SLC needs to fit the physical site of the building
12 Kindergarten needs to fit into a SLC as much as their schedule allows
13. The SLC needs to include custodians, secretaries, support staff, principal
14 Self-contained special ed classrooms need to be a part of a SLC
15. Flexibility in determining the configuration and in ongoing development

Wants: Those objectives that we would like to include in our decision
Assign each want a weight between 1 and 10
10 (most important)
1 (slightly important)

1.	*Cooperative, non-competitive*	*10*
2.	*Continuity: students will have an extended time in the SLC*	*9.5*
3.	*Student involvement in school maintenance/appearance*	*9*
4.	*Family involvement*	*9*
5.	*Children feel important and smart*	*8*

6.	*Students are actively engaged in the whole school community through governance and learning*	*8*
7.	*Daily schedule requires less student travel time*	*8*
8.	*School spirit develops through school songs, all-school meetings*	*8*
9.	*Establishing community doesn't take too long*	*7*
10.	*Strong professional relations*	*6*
11.	*SLC follows recommendations of the Facility and Grade Level Configuration Community Task Force*	*5*
12.	*Staff comfort*	*5*
13.	*SLC development recognizes the elementary educators build community within the classroom*	*5*
14.	*Students are placed in a SLC by a common link*	*2*
15.	*Concern of individuals who served on the Facility and Grade Level Configuration Community Task Force*	*2*
16.	*Leadership within each SLC is defined and identified*	*2*
17.	*Allow staff first year to get to know each other*	*1*

Alternatives: a list of possible decisions

Evaluating the Alternatives: How does each alternative meet our musts?
Key Question: Does this alternative satisfy this must objective?
If yes, We continue to consider the alternative.
With the alternatives left, ask: How well does each alternative meet our wants?

Alternatives that met the most Musts and Wants

1. SLC formed around primary and intermediate neighborhoods
2. Create 5 neighborhoods with no more than 200 students in each
3. Create 3 neighborhoods with no more than 300 students in each
4. Varied grade level combinations that stay together for 2 years through looping or class reorganization
5. Create neighborhoods based on themes, specific learning styles, interests
6. K-2, 1-3, 3-5 neighborhoods
7. Varied grade level configurations without regard for continuity
8. Mixed configurations–some by grade level and some by combinations

Alternatives which did not meet enough Musts and Wants
(numbers correlate to Musts and Wants listed above)

1. Grade level configuration with no other configurations
   Musts not met: *15*
   Wants not met: 2, 15, 11, 12, 17

2. K-5 neighborhoods
   Musts not met: 11
   Wants not met: 7, 12, 14, 17
3. 1-5 neighborhoods
   Musts not met: 11,
   Wants not met: 7, 12, 14, 17
4. Create multiage neighborhoods with multiage classrooms
   Musts not met: 15
   Wants not met: 12, 17
5. Create K. separate, 1-2, 3-4, 5 separate neighborhoods
   Musts not met: 12
   Wants not met: 12, 17

Final Recommendation

1. All buildings will have SLC which are flexible and meet the needs of the school community.

2. SLC will consist of varied grade level combinations that allow for students to stay within a neighborhood for 2 or more consecutive years, whenever possible.

3. A variety of combinations might include, but are not limited to, K-1, K-2, 2-3, 4-5, 1-3, 3-5, 3-4.

4. Kindergarten is encouraged to be a part of a SLC as their schedule allows.

5. Neighborhoods will have no more than 300 students totaling 3-5 neighborhoods per building.

6. Collaboration must occur within grade levels and within the SLC.

7. A district SLC committee will continue to support a timely implementation of SLC as they evolve. Research and development will be continued.

Current Issues That Need to be Addressed

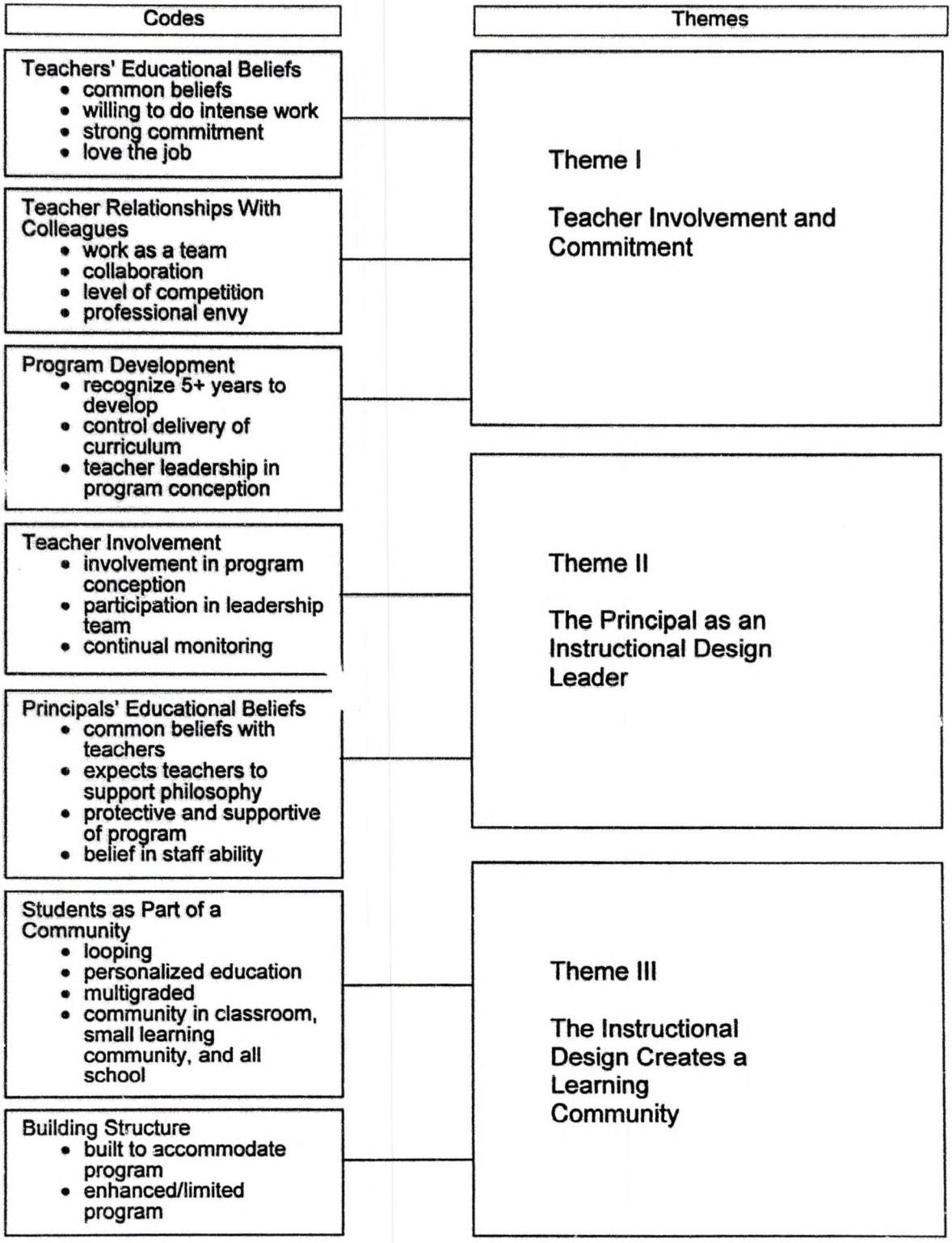
1. What makes a SLC different from what we are doing now?

2. How will implementation occur next year?

3. How will teachers learn to work within SLC?

4. What are the first ideas that can be implemented Fall 2004?
5. How will all adults be included in SLC?

Appendix G
Diagram of Coding and Theme Development



Appendix H
Participant Letter

May 17, 2004

Dear Dr. Nybladh,

This letter is a request to allow me to use information regarding the Moorhead Area Public Schools in my dissertation which I am completing as a partial requirement of my doctoral degree through the Educational Leadership Program at the University of North Dakota under the supervision of Dr. Sherry Houdek. To better enhance my research on small learning communities in elementary schools, I would appreciate being able to use the data I collected for the Moorhead Area Public Schools during Fall Semester 2003.

The information I am requesting is the data collected at the three Minnesota elementary schools, which housed small learning communities. The data collected include and describe the small learning communities' programs, procedures, processes, and strategies. The data also include information on the history and development of each small learning community and identify factors contributing to the sustainability of each program. The role of the building administrators and teachers involved in each small learning community is also included. All the data collected are of public knowledge and have been used by the Moorhead Area Public Schools for the development and implementation of small learning communities in your district.

The names of the districts or any individuals will not appear in the dissertation. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in the study.

If you have questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in making a decision, please contact me at 218-233-2153 or by email at mjschmid@moorhead.k12.mn.us. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Sherry Houdek, at 701-777-2394 or email at sherryl.houdek@und.nodak.edu.

I hope that the results of my study will be of benefit to educators within the Moorhead Area Public Schools, as well as to the broader research community.

I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

Yours Sincerely,

Mary Jo Schmid

Appendix I
Consent of Participant

I have read the information presented in the request letter about a study being conducted by Mary Jo Schmid, doctoral student of the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of North Dakota. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted. I am aware that I may withdraw from the study without penalty at any time by advising the researcher of this decision.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, as the chief representative of the Moorhead Area Public Schools, to allow data collected for the Moorhead Area Public Schools by Mary Jo Schmid, during Fall Semester 2003, to be used as a part of this study.

Dr. Larry Nybladh
Superintendent of Schools
Moorhead, MN

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

Witnessed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix J
Community Development Diagram

The Whole School Community

- encompasses the entire staff and student population
- the culture developed in the classroom and small learning community transcends to the entire school
- students practice interaction skills in a variety of settings
- a student's sense of belonging expands to the whole school

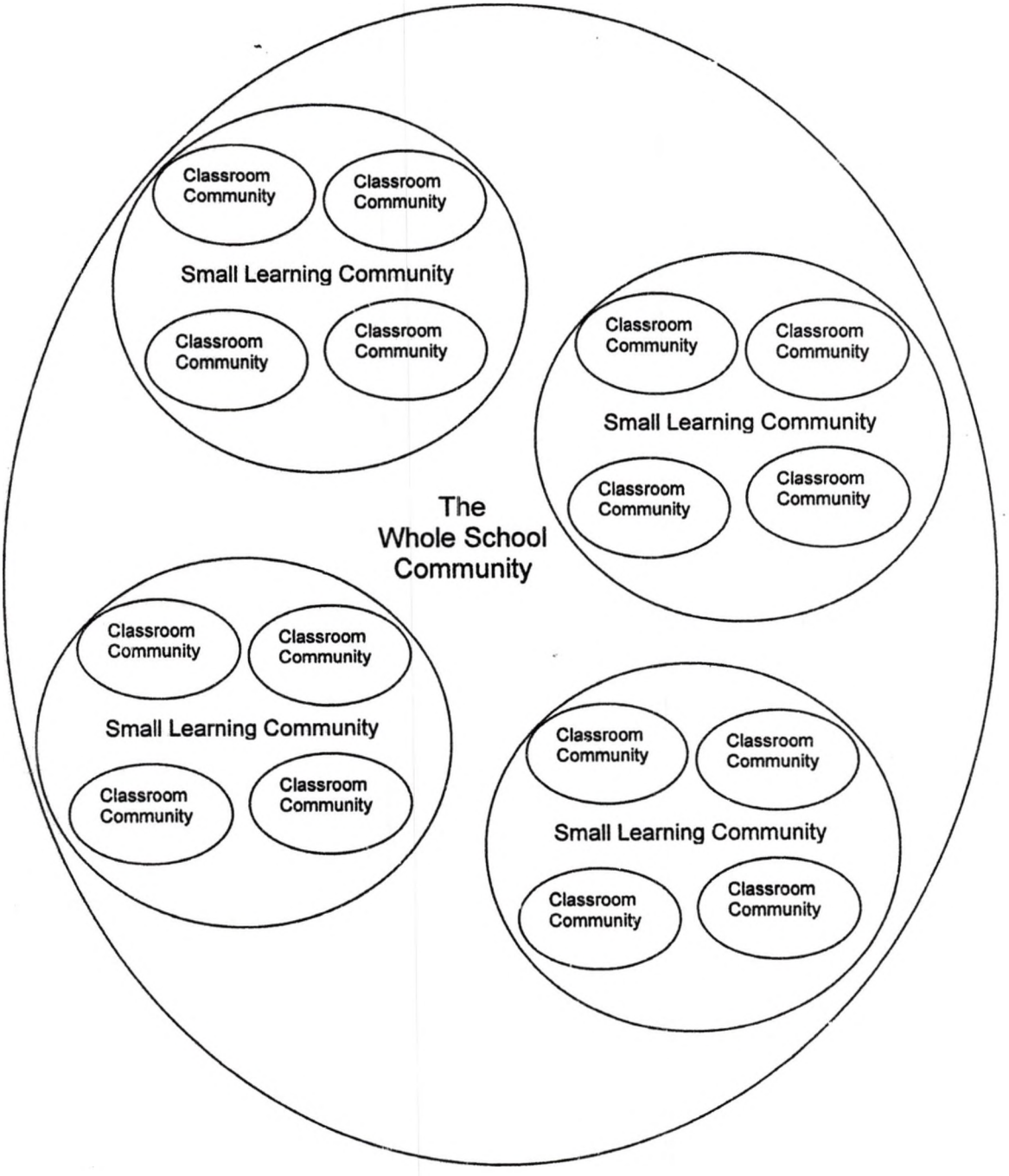
The Small Learning Community

- 2 or more teachers work together with 50-200 students
- teachers collaborate on instructional practices, student needs, and achievement
- a culture of personalization expands as students interact with more adults and students
- students utilize interaction skills with other students outside a classroom
- a student's sense of belonging expands outside the classroom
- a second level of culture develops as practices transcend from the classroom to the small learning community

The Classroom Community

- one teacher and 20-28 students
- teacher makes instructional decisions
- a culture of personalization develops
- students learn to work together
- students develop a sense of belonging
- develops its own culture

Appendix K
Small Learning Communities in an Elementary School



Appendix L

Characteristics of Small Learning Communities in Selected Minnesota Schools

Successful Practices Found in Small Learning Communities (SLC)	Autonomy: implements its own program with its own staff	Leadership and Decision making: shared amongst stakeholders	Create a Unique Identity: establish a vision, mission, goals	Personalization: know students' individual needs and characteristics	Instructional Focus: high expectations are set; staff collaboration and professional development focus on student achievement	Accountability: multiple forms of assessment used to determine student progress on state and local goals.
School A	Traditional teaching techniques were implemented	Staff members served on building leadership team	SLC vision, mission, and goals are those of the whole school; identity based on SLC location and grade level	SLC developed to create intimate, caring environment in large school; students assigned to classroom and SLC parent involvement	Heterogeneous classes; high expectations; weekly collaboration sessions	Multiple assessments used to determine progress; teachers rely on each other for input on student progress; assessment results determine professional development
School B	2 separate, unique programs; teacher directed; staff select to teach in SLC	Staff served on building leadership team; select new staff; establish organizational and curriculum practices	Develop vision, mission, and goals based on student needs; staff self-select; involvement based on shared beliefs	SLC developed to create intimate, caring environment in large school; students assigned to classroom and SLC; remain with teacher for more than one year; flexible instructional practices; teacher collaboration; parent involvement	Heterogeneous classes; high expectations; weekly collaboration sessions; professional development; focused on student needs	Multiple assessments used to determine progress; teachers rely on each other for input on student progress; assessment results determine professional development
School C	Developed by planning team. Each SLC follows whole school plan. Staff choose to work in SLC	Staff served on building leader team; assist in hiring staff; establish organizational and curriculum practices	Develop vision, mission, and goals based on student needs; staff self-select; involvement based on shared beliefs	SLC developed to create intimate, caring environment in large school; students assigned to classroom and SLC; remain with teacher for more than one year; flexible instructional practices; teacher collaboration; parent involvement	Heterogeneous classes; high expectations; weekly collaboration sessions; professional development; focused on student needs	Multiple assessments used to determine progress; teachers rely on each other for input on student progress; assessment results determine professional development

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